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THE KILBURNS

BY

ANNIE THOMAS

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THE KILBURNS

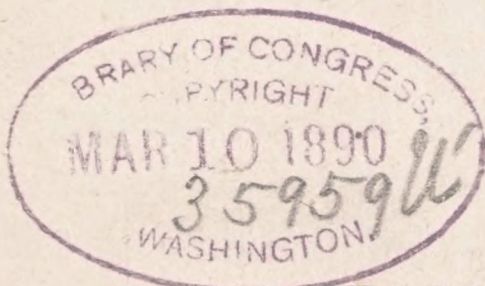
A NOVEL

BY

ANNIE THOMAS

*i.e. Mrs. Gordon
Cudd
'7*

AUTHOR OF "THAT OTHER WOMAN," "CALLED TO ACCOUNT,"
ETC., ETC.



NEW YORK

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THE KILBURNS.

CHAPTER I.

AT MAUNDERS'S.

THE Cad is well-known to a large majority as a delightfully picturesque little river, which yields a fair supply of fine-flavored trout to the adroit angler. But comparatively few people know Caddleton. It is in Caddleton this story opens. Therefore a brief description of it and its worthy merits may be acceptable.

It straggles up a hill from the river in a westerly direction, so that those who promenade its long wide street have the full benefit of the bitter east winds which come rushing off the moor with unimpaired vigor, year after year, for at least nine months out of the twelve. Two fine old churches adorn it at either extremity ; and several handsome old red brick and gray stone mansions stand round about it in their own high-walled-in grounds. Its one draper's shop is a miracle of elasticity, for it appears to hold nearly everything that the feminine mind of Caddleton desires. And be it understood that the feminine mind of Caddleton has enlightened and broad views of the becoming.

It has the usual number of shops wherein the other necessities of life may be obtained. It has a capital hotel, "The Feathers," where carriages of many kinds can be hired. And it has *Maunders's*,

“Maunders’s” is a pleasing feature in Caddleton life. At Maunders’s, last year’s works of fiction, travel, and biography can be obtained at a reasonable rate of subscription, and through Maunders’s nearly all the magazines circulate through Caddleton and its environs. All sorts of useful and useless articles, that are more or less fascinating in appearance, repose upon the well-arranged counter and tables. Comfortable chairs, and a couple of spring-seated, softly-cushioned sofas placed on either side of a bright wood fire in winter, and near to the wide sunny window in summer, make Maunders’s a favorite *rendezvous* with both young and old. But the chief attraction to Maunders’s, was Mrs. Maunders herself.

Twenty-five years ago, when she had made her first appearance on the Caddleton boards, general opinion had pronounced her to be the bonniest bride who had come into the neighborhood since Lady Rollamore’s day. And even now, though she wore the plainest black still in memory of her long-departed husband, Mrs. Maunders was a wonderfully attractive-looking woman of forty-five. Some people had thought she acted unwisely in setting up in business when Doctor Maunders died ; but she knew her own business best, and preferred the loss of an imaginary social status to being, with her daughters, dependent on the charity of her family, who were more given to grieving over the improvidence of their poor relations than to ungrudgingly giving to them.

At the present time her social status was as good as ever. The friends who had welcomed her warmly as the popular, clever doctor’s wife, welcomed her warmly still. Their children were the friends of her children. She had never touched anything beyond the fringe of the county society, so, when the fringe slipped from

her willing fingers, she made no effort to clutch at and retain it. The shop brought her in a good income, enabled her to educate her daughters well, and to give them all the comforts and pleasures they would have had if the doctor had lived. So she looked with pride at the name of "Maunders" in big letters over her shop door, regarding it as the symbol of her independence.

She was standing arranging some recently unpacked books, dipping into the contents of several, and promising herself many a winter evening's enjoyment by their means, when the first note of discord in the harmony of her life was struck by an unconscious hand. A little pony trap rattled up to the door, and a comfortably-dressed, pleasant-faced woman got out of it, and hurriedly entered the shop. She was the housekeeper at Parkventon, Lord Rollamore's neighboring family seat.

"Can you put your hand on a couple of good servants at once for me, Mrs. Maunders?" she began hurriedly.

Then she sat down, and drew a long breath of suppressed excitement and burning anxiety to startle her hearer with the news she was about to communicate.

"For Parkventon? you are wanting them for yourself, Mrs. Jennings?"

"For Parkventon. But merely as temporaries till the establishment can be properly arranged. Things have gone down at Parkventon, as *you* know, Mrs. Maunders; but we may confidently look forward to a better state of things now (this last sentence was an unacknowledged literal translation from the letter of the man of business, which she had just received), for my lord and my lady, and the family, are coming home to-night!"

"And so you want a cook and housemaid imme-

diately ?” Mrs. Maunders said, thoughtfully. She was not nearly so much impressed by the intelligence as Mrs. Jennings had intended her to be. Yet, for all that, her heart had given a little jump as the housekeeper mentioned the fact of the Rollamores’ return.

“Immediately — within this very hour, if you can manage it, Mrs. Maunders. It’s a heavy responsibility to throw upon me to have the whole house ready to receive the family at a day’s notice. But I’m equal to meeting it. For five-and-twenty years, there hasn’t a day passed that I haven’t entered every room at Park-venton and seen it aired. I’ve always kept a couple of good girls going at work under me, as you know, and the girls I’ve got now will do very well for the rough work, but I must have a good cook and housemaid.”

“They’ll bring servants with them, won’t they ? but here ! I’ve got my finger on the names of two who may do ; close at hand, too. They’ve been living with old Mrs. Cooper, but she thinks they’re not kind to her cats, because they don’t like getting up three times in the night to feed the Angora kittens.”

Then, with a steady hand, she wrote the addresses of the two servants, though there were tears in her eyes as she bent over the paper to do so.

“And how are the young ladies ?” Mrs. Jennings asked.

“Well, and busy as usual.”

“Miss Florence is growing very handsome, much what I remember you twenty years ago, Mrs. Maunders.”

“Many people think her like me, but she’s a greatly improved edition of her mother,” that mother replied, smiling thoughtfully. Then, to her relief, Mrs. Jennings, after one or two more references to the over-

whelming responsibilities that were heaped upon her, withdrew in search of the necessary domestics.

Then Mrs. Maunders sat down and rested her forehead in her hands for a few minutes, and thought of many things ; but chiefly of a man who had been Gilbert Kilburn when she knew him, and who was now Lord Rollamore.

“ He’ll never recognize me ; the sylph is completely enveloped and obscured in the matron, and there’s no one to tell him that, what he left to perish, Doctor Maunders found and picked up and cherished. But Florence ! how will Florence strike him if he ever chances to see her ? ”

As she would not answer this question, and customers began to drop in, all of them brimming over with items of intelligence respecting the sudden and unexpected return of the Rollamores to Parkventon, she dismissed the subject from her mind. Concentrating herself on the business of the hour, as had always been her wont, and was her secret of success, Mrs. Maunders went on for the remainder of that day, acting in the living present, and forgetting the past in which Gilbert Kilburn had figured.

But when the daylight died out, as it does about six o’clock in October, and she went into the warm, pleasant parlor behind the shop, and sat down to tea with her daughters, the doctor’s widow looked more careworn than her children had ever seen her look before. So they tried to cheer her by relating all the little bits of gossip they had heard, while out in pursuit of their respective callings during the day, about Lord Rollamore’s return, and the Kilburns generally.

“ Did you ever see Lord Rollamore, mamma ? ” Florence asked.

Mrs. Maunders hesitated an instant before she com-

mitted herself to the utterance of the first falsehood she had ever implied to her children. Then she answered :—

“No, dear, I never saw Lord Rollamore (he was only the Honorable Gilbert Kilburn when I knew him,)” she said to herself extenuatingly, and Florence went on hastily, without noticing her mother’s confusion.

“Stupid I am, to be sure. Of course papa and you weren’t married when Lord Rollamore went away. It’s twenty-seven years since any of the Kilburns have been at Parkventon. Doctor Sheffield was telling me just now. He must be quite old now !”

“Not old ; only about fifty-two,” Mrs. Maunders interrupted, reddening slightly. Then she flushed up almost painfully as she saw both her daughters look at her with astonishment.

“Why, you spoke as if you knew all about him, mamma, and you’ve never even seen him,” Kathleen laughed, and her younger sister added :—

“And you’re looking almost as excited as Miss Cophlete did when I told her the Kilburns were coming back. She almost tumbled off the footpath in her excitement, and told me that ‘her father had married Lord Rollamore’s father and mother, and christened himself and all his brothers and sisters, and that she quite felt that she should meet him as an old friend.’ Absurd, wasn’t it? As if a man could remember any one he hadn’t seen for twenty-seven years.”

“It’s even more absurd our wasting so much time in talking about people we never *have* known, and never *shall* know.”

Mrs. Maunders spoke quietly, but the girls recognized in their mother’s tone and manner a determination “to have done with the subject of the Kilburns for that night at least,” which they did not care to combat.

Accordingly, Kathleen started a fresh topic by asking :—

“Where did you see Doctor Sheffield, Flo? What a number of patients he must have in Wreymouth; you’re constantly meeting him on that road.”

The girl spoke with a faint touch of chagrin in her voice that did not escape the quick susceptible ears of her mother and sister. The latter only replied unconcernedly :—

“He’s the parish doctor, and the Wreymouth people are always more or less feverish, you know. Mamma, my children have been more obnoxious than usual to-day. I told Mrs. Hunter that if she couldn’t insist upon their being more obedient, that I should be obliged to give up attempting to teach them any longer. She knows I have the offer from that school at Exeter, so she understood that I meant what I said.”

“Would you be willing to go to the Exeter school?” Mrs. Maunders had vehemently opposed the idea of Florence’s accepting the offer when it was made, but intuitively now Florence felt that her mother wished her to accept it.

“I would go ‘willingly,’ but, of course, not gladly. It would be a pinch to leave you both.”

She sprang to her feet as she spoke, and went over to a side-table, where the shaded lamps and open work-baskets and books were suggestively awaiting them. She could recall hundreds of evenings passed in this way alone with her mother and sister with never the suspicion of a shadow of constraint or misunderstanding between them. Now, suddenly, not only the shadow but the substance of such misunderstanding had sprung into being. Kathleen had seemed vexed at her having met and quoted Doctor Sheffield. And her mother, who had hitherto always clung with the ten-

acity of all-absorbing affection to the companionship of both her children, now seemed to think it desirable that she, Florence, the pet and darling, should leave her home and go alone into the world ! What did it mean ?

It was a relief to all three of them when, after about an hour spent in vainly endeavoring to chat easily and freely as they worked, a ring at the private door announced a visitor. The feeling of relief was of brief duration, though, for in a few minutes Doctor Sheffield came in, and Florence felt inclined to take her candle and go off to bed, as she realized that his first glance was given to hersell, and that Kathleen saw that it was so, and was disturbed by it.

“Forgive a lonely bachelor for finding his arid sitting-room unendurable the moment he pictured this cosy interior, Mrs. Maunders.”

The words were inoffensive enough in themselves, but the manner of the man in speaking them grated harshly on the ears of two of his hearers. And they happened to be the two whom he desired to impress favorably. Kathleen felt soothed by them !

“You know we are always glad to see any friends who are kind enough to drop in of an evening.”

His hostess smiled and moved her chair away from the side table nearer to the fire, so as to include him in the circle. The two girls continued steadily working, though the heart of the one was palpitating with half-hopeful, half-fearful excitement, and the heart of the other was heavy with an undefinable dull dread of coming unhappiness. Doctor Sheffield stared at them both steadily and perceptively as he talked on slowly and gravely to their mother ; and, as he looked and talked, he strengthened himself in a resolution to which he had been deliberately coming for a long time.

Descriptions of personal appearance are always more

or less vain, vague, futile, and unsatisfactory. Still, it is necessary to put forward some sort of presentment of these three young people, who will figure largely on the canvas on which the story of the Kilburn family is painted.

Kathleen's cannot be portrayed in black-and-white. She had fair, transparent skin, through which the blue veins and the pure red blood showed clearly. She had very bright, very blue eyes, and very bright fair hair, so bright and fair indeed that it almost justified people in calling it golden hair. She had white, small, regular teeth, and prettily-curved rosy lips, and a neat, graceful little figure. But the prettiest thing about her, and her greatest charm, was the interrogatory frown that was so quick to gather her brows together whenever the girl felt anxious or curious, perplexed or annoyed.

And this frown was on her brows as she matched her colors and painted in with her needle a conventionalized group of lilies and marguerites on a panel for the boudoir door of the lady to whom she was giving music lessons. But it was not the subtle shades of silk, nor the intricate stitches in her design, that were perplexing Kathleen this night.

The other girl had different coloring, and a finer physique. Her hair was not bright, it was thick and rich-looking, black in some lights, and golden chestnut in others. Her skin was as transparent as Kathleen's, but it was dark, and as the color only came into her face when she was animated, or a little moved by some passing emotion, many people called her sallow. She had very soft hazel eyes, and a dear, delicately-outlined little nose, that escaped being aquiline by being inquiring. And she had a very beautiful mouth, and like of chin and throat; a mobile, sensitive, delicately-curved

mouth, that one felt instinctively could never utter a mean or false word. Her figure was rather above the average height ; she looked tall by the side of Kathleen, but was not tall in reality, and was as yet only slim and graceful, as it is common for the figures of girls of twenty to be. But her shoulders were quite innocent of any inclination to the once much-esteemed feeble slant downwards, and her head was perfectly set on her round throat. You could have drawn a straight line from the back of her head to the back of her heel she was so erect. She had a voice that interested every one to whom she spoke, and a smile that seemed to be "meant especially" for every one. And she had a delightfully keen sense of the becoming, and so always wore what suited her exactly in color and shape. For the rest, she must speak for herself in these pages.

The man who sat calmly and critically surveying these two girls had an exterior which lends itself easily to a written description. Tall and strongly, rather stoutly built, fair, pale, straight-featured, perfectly composed. His steady, well-opened gray eyes had a habit of fixing themselves upon you, and gazing unwinkingly at you for some minutes in a way that impressed some people greatly with a sense of the intensity of his professional insight, acumen, and caution. Others were irritated by it, and among these latter was Florence Maunders.

He had been in Caddleton about ten years, having taken Doctor Maunders's practice when that gentleman died, and, during all these years, he—Sheffield—had been on friendly terms with the widow and daughters of his predecessor. He was about thirty-four now, a grave, quiet, handsome man, with a spotless reputation, both socially and professionally ; a gentlemanly man, too, one to whom any mother in Mrs. Maunders's po-

sition might well have been glad to give her daughter.

Nevertheless, Mrs. Maunders's heart gave a startled throb when, after about half-an-hour's conversation on various local topics, he turned his glance away from the girls at last, and asked her slowly if he might have ten minutes' conversation with her alone?

"Certainly, come up to the drawing-room," she said, and was going to take up the small lamp, but he was before hand with her, and when they reached the drawing-room, he put the lamp just where the light fell full on her face; and, after a moment's vexed hesitation, she resolved to sit still and bear it.

"Nothing very serious, I trust? Any one worse in my district?"

She tried to speak easily, but her nerves, which had been shaken in the morning were playing her false now, and she felt her lips quiver.

"Something important to me, not a new thing, as you will have surmised, but one that must be brought to a climax soon. May I ask for your good wishes and influence with your daughter when I ask her—as I shall presently—to be my wife?"

"Assuredly. You shall have both," she began warmly. Kath—"

"Kathleen will be on my side too, she has always been on my side," he interrupted, and Mrs. Maunders grasped, as he spoke, that the daughter he had won her consent to woo, was the one she did not wish him to wed, for Kathleen's liking for him was an open secret to her mother. It was wofully painful and embarrassing now for that mother to find that it was Florence he wanted, not Kathleen!—yet she dared not betray Kathleen's secret. She could only pray fervently that Florence would refuse him.

"You must understand that I will not attempt to bias

my daughter—her own heart must teach her what answer to make,” she faltered out, while his eyes searched her face unwaveringly.

“A minute ago you promised me to use your influence in my favor. I must ask you to keep your promise. You are not a feeble woman, Mrs. Maunders, I am sure of that; you have liked me as a friend? Tell Florence that you will like to have me for a son-in-law!”

There was a pause; her heart ached so for Kathleen’s disappointment—a girl can surely know no more bitter one than this of being superseded by a sister whom she loves!—that she could not speak. Presently he broke the silence.

“You have heard this news of the Rollamores’ coming back to-night?”

“Mrs. Jennings told me this morning.”

“He will have changed very much since you saw him last?”

She lifted her head; the angry blood rushed in a hot wave to her face.

“You forget that Lord Rollamore had left the place before Doctor Maunders and I married—before I came here.”

“Ah! yes. To be sure, you never saw him *here*,” Dr. Sheffield said, quietly. Then he took up the lamp, and with the words, “You will use your influence with Florence on my behalf, I’m sure,” he followed her downstairs, where they found Kathleen alone. Florence, to her mother’s intense relief, had gone to bed!

Mrs. Maunders went to her bed that night with the feeling of a reprieved criminal. For a time the reactionary sensation of relief was paramount. At least until the next day, she would not be called upon to witness the sight of the dagger of disappointment being dug into Kathleen’s heart. But soon this soothing

reflection was banished by the recollection of Doctor Sheffield's words and manner when he had referred to her "never having seen Lord Rollamore *here*." What did he mean? How much did he know? And how had he obtained his knowledge? And how would he use it should she ever run counter to his wishes? These questions ran in her mind all night, repeating themselves over and over again in a thousand ways as words do in a fever dream, until the gray dawn broke, and forced little streaks of light through the blinds and curtains. Then she slept uneasily for an hour, and was later down to attend to the dressing of her shop than she had been since the day she opened it.

("How I hate my past," she whispered to herself, "and how I dread Doctor Sheffield.")

CHAPTER II.

THE FAMILY AT PARKVENTON.

"WHAT shall I say to Mrs. Hunter? Shall I tell her that you wish—I mean, shall I tell her that I shall go to that Exeter school?"

Florence spoke with her head averted, as she stood ready dressed for her walk to Wreymouth Lodge the morning after Doctor Sheffield's visit. The girl had come half into the shop from the back-parlor; Kathleen was still seated at the breakfast-table, idly, sweetly dreaming that Doctor Sheffield's private words to her mother had borne reference to herself.

"I must speak to you, dear, before you go out." Mrs. Maunders's voice shook, and her hand, as she laid it on Florence's, was feverish and trembling. "I must speak to you," she repeated, and she drew Florence

into the shop, shutting the parlor door, as she did so, in a way that seemed to Kathleen to vaguely menace those sweet dreams of hers.

“Doctor Sheffield spoke to me last night of his hopes of winning your love—of marrying you, my child,” she blurted out, nervously. “I told him I could say nothing—promise nothing—”

“Neither can I say or promise anything, mother—excepting this, that nothing would ever induce me to marry him myself, though I won’t object to him as a brother-in-law.”

“But it’s you he wants, not Kathleen.”

“He will never have me, but he’s thinking that he wants me settles the question of my going to Exeter. I’d go at once if I could; as it is, I must wait till after the Christmas holidays. Meanwhile, don’t tell Kathleen, and she’ll get him, and be happy, I hope, in time.”

All this Florence murmured in such low rapid tones, that not a word reached Kathleen’s ears, though it must be admitted that those pretty ears were anxiously on the stretch.

“I will write to Doctor Sheffield from Weymouth to-day,” Florence went on, kissing her mother as she spoke. “You shall not be troubled about it, darling mother.” Then she added aloud, as she opened the intervening door,—

“I am going to be a sensible girl, Kathleen, and take this situation at Exeter after all.”

Then she went off to her daily duties, holding her head up a shade higher than usual, and looking bright, strong, and heart-free, as she was.

“What made Flo’ come to that conclusion so suddenly, mother?” the elder sister asked, a little suspiciously, when the younger one was gone.

“Her own good sense! the salary offered is double what she receives from Mrs. Hunter.”

“We shall miss her dreadfully,” Kathleen said, cheerfully. At the bottom of her heart there was an unacknowledged sense of relief! When Florence went to Exeter, Doctor Sheffield would no longer meet her daily on the Weymouth road. Then she went up to the drawing-room to practice the pieces she was to teach her pupils in the afternoon, and, for a short time, Mrs. Maunders dropped the mask of peaceful, pleasant interest in the present, and suffered her disturbed thoughts of the past, and Doctor Sheffield’s possible knowledge of it, to cloud her good motherly face.

(“If girls only knew how their girlish thoughtlessness will recoil upon the heads of the women they will become, how much wiser they would be,” she said regretfully to herself, and then her brow and heart lightened a little, as she thought of how wisely and decisively Florence was going to act.

“If she had been weak and evasive, and had thrown the burden of answering Doctor Sheffield upon me, everything would have been very unpleasant. And if she had refused to go to Exeter, the chances are that, sooner or later, Lord Rollamore would have seen her and made inquiries.”)

This was the course Mrs. Maunders’s train of thought took as she busied herself about the shop, and seemed to her customers to have no ideas beyond them and the wares they needed.

There was no sentiment about Florence Maunders yet! There very rarely is any sentiment about a girl who is in good health, has plenty of occupation, and whose heart and fancy are both untouched. Accordingly she did not hesitate for a moment over the composition of her letter to Doctor Sheffield. She had

something definite to say, and having no sentiment about her, she said it straightforwardly.

“DEAR DOCTOR SHEFFIELD.—My mother has told me what you said to her last night about me. I am very sorry that you should have paid me the great compliment of making me an offer, for I cannot accept it. It would be wrong of me to do so, for I could never feel anything more than friendship for you. That I shall always feel, and I hope you will always return it.

Your sincere friend,

FLORENCE MAUNDERS.”

This letter she sealed and put into her pocket, intending to post it in the Weymouth pillar-box when she went out for the mid-day walk with her pupils. But it happened that this day Mrs. Hunter wanted to talk to someone about all the delights she anticipated from the reappearance of the Kilburns upon the social boards. Accordingly, the governess and two little girls were told off for the honor of accompanying Mrs. Hunter in her pre-luncheon drive.

“You may cut the lessons a little short this morning, Miss Maunders, and Hilda and Alice and you shall drive with me at half past eleven,” said the autocratic lady who paid Florence for her time, and therefore felt justified in disposing of it as she pleased. So Florence and her pupils got into the carriage, the horses’ heads were turned towards Parkventon, and Mrs. Hunter slipped into the subject that was uppermost in her mind.

“We shall get a good view of the house from Venton Hill; the leaves are fortunately nearly all fallen! Count how many chimneys are smoking, Miss Maunders. I know the house so well that I shall be able to judge how many rooms are occupied.”

Mrs. Hunter's head was half out of the carriage window on the Parkventon side as she spoke. Presently she drew it back, crimson and elated.

"Drive very slowly," she ordered the coachman through the little trap window in front. "Luckily we're going up hill, for I see three gentlemen, an elderly man and two young ones, strangers, coming down. It must be Lord Rollamore and his sons! I wish I had the open carriage, I should have bowed. I hope they'll pass my side."

As Mrs. Hunter expressed the wish, Florence, to conceal a smile, bent forward and looked out of the open window on her side. The carriage was going at a foot pace, and an elderly gentleman was standing still by the side of the road to let it pass. The girl saw him look puzzled as her eyes met his. The next moment they were past, and Mrs. Hunter was lamenting that she had looked out of the wrong window.

"I only saw the young men, and they were looking superciliously straight in front of them," she complained. "I couldn't bow to them. Their father must have been on your side, Miss Maunders. Do tell me what Lord Rollamore is like?"

"Plain and podgy. He seemed to think the road belonged to him, and looked quite surprised at any one driving along it," Florence said carelessly, and Mrs. Hunter told her complacently,—

"You see he didn't *know* it was *our* carriage. The Hunters and Kilburns used to be quite neighborly, but, of course, he wouldn't recognize you as belonging to *us* in any way. The young men are strikingly handsome—like their mother, I've heard. I shall call in a few days, and then I will tell you all about them. Dear, dear! what *life* then used to be in the neighborhood, when the old people were at Parkventon, and

this man was the heir. There wasn't a girl for miles round who didn't hope to be the Honorable Gilbert's choice."

So she babbled on, and Florence listened indifferently, for her mind was more given to the consideration of how she should post her letter than to the Kilburns of either the past or present.

Meantime Lord Rollamore had said to his sons,—

"There was a charming girl in that carriage. She must be one of our neighbors, to be driving along this back-road. Find out at the lodge."

"Probably she hails from Caddleton," Gilbert Kilburn, the eldest son, said languidly.

He disliked the prospect of wintering at Parkventon, but his doing so was made the condition on which his father had agreed to pay certain debts, which were beginning to worry the young man's usually sweet temper and serene disposition. Accordingly, he resigned himself to the exigencies of his case, but could not affect an interest in his surroundings.

At the lodge gate Lord Rollamore was told that the carriage he had met was Mrs. Hunter's, of Wreymouth Lodge, and immediately he ceased to be interested in the girl with the face that had attracted him.

"I remember hearing my poor mother say that the Hunters 'were people who were here, there and every where, but had no place of their own' on the social ladder," he remarked to his sons.

Gilbert smiled dismally.

"Strikes me that's the common lot in this region; feel like it already myself," he said in the soft liquid tones that misled the many into supposing him to be an easily-guided and morally back-boneless young man, as compared with his brother Fergus, whose quicker manners, keener glance, and more unflagging energy

seemed to fit him well for the profession he had chosen—the navy.

“ You’ll soon know the ropes down here, and then you’ll go with a fair wind, old fellow,” the younger brother remarked encouragingly. “ Presently, for my own part, I’m very glad to have this gunnery course, it will be a grind, but it will keep me in Plymouth for three months.”

“ Fortunately, you’re not of Gilbert’s opinion, that Parkventon cedes its claim to be the dullest hole upon earth to Plymouth,” Lord Rollamore put in testily.

“ You bent the twig of my infant mind in the direction of that unflattering opinion of Parkventon yourself, sir.”

Gilbert laughed gently.

Lord Rollamore smiled grimly at the recollection, as his son reminded him of the aversion he had felt, and expressed for their chief family place for many years of his life, an aversion, which had its root in a wrong he had wrought, and a disappointment he had brought upon himself.

“ I was a fool, and didn’t appreciate the advantages and privileges I enjoyed at the old place in the days of my youth ; the consequence was I—never mind—my son will be wiser, I hope,” he said, laying his hand on Gilbert’s arm to help himself up a stiffish incline on the turf. They had taken a short cut across the park to the house, and now, as they approached it, three ladies came down from the terrace to meet them.

“ The girls borrowed the dog-cart from the farm, and have been out exploring Rollamore,” Lady Rollamore said, and the Honorables Sylvia and Cicely gabbled on enthusiastically.

“ And we’ve found out the funniest little town-village, papa ! A place called Caddleton, with funny little old-

world shops, and old-world ladies shopping in them," Sylvia was saying when Cicely cut in,—

"And such a very artistic book-selling and art-pot establishment, a sweet place, with a sweet woman in it. I declare I'll never regret being out of reach of Mudie's while I can go and get my current literature and gossip about it at Maunders's. Gilbert, it will be something for you to do, to drive me there three days a week to change books."

"You'll never get lazy Gilbert to exert himself to search out the literary resources of Caddleton. Will she, my son?" Lady Rollamore said affectionately. She smiled as she spoke, and he responded to her smile. For this mother and son understood each other better than either was understood by any other being in the world. She knew that laziness was not the rock on which he was likely to split, and he knew that she knew it.

"Even mamma begins to see how incorrigibly lazy you are, you dear old thing. But when I tell you that there's a pretty daughter at Maunders's, I shall have a volunteer escort in *you*, Fergus, I know."

"Yes, I'd go anywhere to see a pretty girl," the sailor frankly acknowledged. "The library part of Maunders's doesn't appeal to me—'My only books are women's looks,' etc., etc. Aren't you rather afraid of my making a fool of myself for a pretty face?"

He looked sharply round the family group as he asked the question. Only Gilbert replied to it.

"You'll never sacrifice yourself for a pretty face, or for anything else," the elder brother said listlessly; and both the sisters began clamoring that "poor dear sleepy Gilbert judged other men by himself, and couldn't credit any one with taste, or feeling, or energy enough to lift his eyes to look at a pretty face if one was to pass close by him."

“That’s it!—that’s Gilbert!” Gilbert’s father and brother cried ecstatically.

His mother thought something else—and said nothing. Twenty-six years had passed since she had found it was not judicious to say what she thought before her lord, who deemed himself her master. The course of training she had undergone in learning this lesson had been brief but effectual. While she was still a very young wife and mother, her instincts, as the latter, had taught her that, while speaking the truth, it was well not to speak the whole truth very often to her husband. Accordingly, with that loving desire for the preservation of peace at home which is implanted in the hearts of most women, she learnt to be reserved with frank words, and secretive with an open expression.

Sometimes she reproached herself for the line of policy which her peace-loving nature led her to pursue. For to her Lord Rollamore seemed exactly what he wished to seem to her—namely, a man who had always worn his heart upon his sleeve, and whose one secret in life had been the secret of his love for her before he declared it. She thought him a fine character, in short, and blamed herself for being alive to his *one* fault—a little inequality, to put it mildly, of temper.

CHAPTER III.

CAUTION AND CHARITY.

THE letter was still in Florence’s pocket when she left the Hunters’ house to go home that afternoon. It seemed as difficult to get rid of the momentous epistle as of the remembrance of a crime. She had not cared to entrust it to one of the Hunters’ servants, nor to put

it on the hall-table with the family's correspondence; for in her daily voyages backwards and forwards to the luncheon table, she had often seen the envelopes of that correspondence undergoing sharp scrutiny from various pairs of eyes. To post it now in the Wreymouth pillar-box would be to delay its delivery, and to lengthen her own walk considerably. Accordingly she kept it in her pocket, resolving to give some known and trustworthy Caddleton boy a penny for taking it to Doctor Sheffield's house. To go home with that letter still in her pocket would be to break her word of promise both to the ear and heart of her mother. Moreover, it would give her the feeling of one who had a combustible concealed on her person, which at any moment might explode and set sisterly relations between Kathleen and herself in a blaze.

She was within a quarter of a mile of the west end of Caddleton, and had got her mind's eye firmly fixed on a likely boy, when she heard the sharp firm trot of the Doctor's cob coming near behind her. In a moment or two it was pulled up by her side, and its rider was bending down—calm, composed, and scrupulously neat as usual—to offer his hand.

“I saw you driving towards Parkventon this morning. Surely Mrs. Hunter was not going to call?” he began, and the strain of pettiness in the expression of his curiosity jarred on the girl.

“She merely took the children and myself for a drive.” Then she put her hand in her pocket and took hold of the letter, but did not draw it out. The position was horrible to her. He had dismounted, and was walking along by her side, looking at her now and again in that obnoxiously calm, unblushing way he had and not speaking. Presently they reached the two or three detached houses, which stood as the advance-

guard of the village—in five minutes' more they would be at her mother's shop door, and both her mother and Kathleen would draw wrong conclusions from their companionship. With a mental effort she drew the letter out, and discharged its contents at him, simultaneously with the words—

“I am so sorry that I've had to write it, and you ought to have it ever so long ago ; but you'll be friendly with us all the same, I know.”

He took the letter, and with an abrupt “Good-afternoon,” Florence almost ran home and in at the private door. The first person she saw was Kathleen, who asked,—

“What is the matter ? Have you met a tramp ? There are a lot of them about, Miss Cophlete says. She has been in here talking to mother quite in a panic, poor thing ! She was driving along that high-hedged lane, near Parkventon, this afternoon, when some man sprang on to the hedge from the other side, and brandished a stick at her. Luckily her old pony always gallops when its head is turned homewards, so she turned and galloped home and came and told mother. She's going to speak to the police.”

“They can't interfere with a man for brandishing a stick, that didn't interfere with her.”

“How unsympathetic you are, Flo' ; it interfered with her nerves.”

“Why did she take her nerves into a high-hedged, half-private lane ? ”

“Why, don't you understand ? She, or rather her family, are very old friends of the Kilburn family. Her father was vicar here, you know, when this Lord Rollamore was born. And poor, dear old Miss Cophlete can't forget that her father christened him. It's very natural.”

Florence laughed. “But it isn't natural to expect

Lord Rollamore to remember it—is it, now? and, Kathleen, come with me to the choral class to-night. Mother looks tired. Let her have an evening quite to herself—to rest and read.”

“To the choral class!” Kathleen half-assented. Then, remembering that Doctor Sheffield didn’t approve of the choral class, because it sometimes engrossed the services of his assistant, she added,—

“After all, perhaps I had better stay at home. Miss Cophlete will be there with her niece, so you’ll have some one to speak to; and if any one should come in this evening, one of us should be at home to save mother the exertion of entertaining that person.”

“No one ever chooses the choral class evening to call on us, because all our friends know that we belong to it,” Florence argued. But Kathleen persisted in her refusal to go, betraying by that persistent refusal that she wholly hoped for, and partly expected, the appearance of Doctor Sheffield.

The Guildhall, in which the choral classes were held, was at the further and lower end of the little town, on the banks of the river. October was drawing to a close, the days were rapidly and perceptibly shortening and darkening, and some little difficulty was beginning to be felt by Florence in getting to the classes. She had gone alone through the past summer and early autumn. But to go alone now would be unpleasant, especially as tramps were reported to be about in alarming abundance. Accordingly, as a rule, she secured the companionship of Miss Cophlete and her niece. This night however, she had resolved to rely on that of Kathleen, and now Kathleen refused to go. The younger sister knew that the elder one was waiting and hoping for a joy that was a chimera. But to word this knowledge would have

been to wound one whose heart was made of very tender stuff. Of such tender stuff, unfortunately, that whether she eventually failed to win or won Doctor Sheffield, he would cause that poor heart many an ache. So, after one or two more appeals, which Kathleen disregarded, Florence resolved to banish timidity, and go to her evening's recreation alone.

"I don't like your going in this way, Flo," her mother said hesitatingly, when the girl came down after tea dressed for her walk.

"It's quite early, though it's dark, mother ; many of the shops are lighted still, and I know every inch of my way. I'll arrange to come home with the Cophletes ; their garden-boy always fetches them."

"After her fright this afternoon, probably poor Miss Cophlete won't care to go out at night."

"Oh yes, she will ; you know her faith in the Cadleton police arrangements is boundless ; don't be nervous, mother ;" and Florence, as she spoke, bent down and kissed her mother, and whispered,—

"Doctor Sheffield has my letter ; he won't come in to-night."

Then she went out, and Mrs. Maunders and Kathleen drew their chairs nearer to the fire, and began, the one to knit, the other to read.

Presently Kathleen looked up from her book with an air of expectancy and excitement.

"I wouldn't say anything till Flo' had gone, but—Doctor Sheffield is coming in this evening ; he told me so—I met him this morning."

"He nearly always tells us he is coming if we meet him, and frequently doesn't come."

Mrs. Maunders spoke with filled indifference. She had good reason to suppose that Florence's note would keep him away on this occasion, and she had also

good reason for hoping that he might be kept away until—well, until she could contemplate a certain portion of her part more calmly than she was able to do at present.

“The Parkventon people always employed papa, didn’t they?”

“You know that none of the Kilburns have been at Parkventon since I came to Caddleton, dear.”

“But before that; when they were at Parkventon, they employed papa, so I suppose they’re sure to employ Doctor Sheffield.”

“It’s useless for me to make any promise on the subject.”

“But, mother dear, don’t you feel interested? Don’t you *like* Doctor Sheffield that you won’t feel a little interest in his career?”

“I am sure he will have a prosperous one, for he is clever and cautious.”

“Clever! yes, indeed, everybody knows *that* who knows anything about him; but ‘cautious,’ ‘cautious,’ isn’t exactly the word I should use if I meant to praise a person.”

Mrs. Maunders laughed and refrained from saying that she felt no ungovernable impulse to praise Doctor Sheffield. She only remarked,—

“You remember what Burns says:—

‘Prudent, cautious, self-control
Is wisdom’s root.’

“Where does he say that? I’ll get a Burns and find the poem and you shall read it to me, mother.”

So she searched the bookcase and found a copy of Burns’ poems, and listened to that pathetic appealing condemnation of the faults and follies of genius, which begins with the words,—

“Is there a whim-inspired fool,”

The search for the book and the reading of the poem tided her over the next ten minutes pleasantly enough. Then she began to cast furtive glances at the clock, and to wonder why *he* was so late.

“Perhaps Doctor Sheffield has been called to see some case of sudden illness, mother?”

“Very likely.”

“A doctor’s life is a very hard one.”

“A very hard one—one of the noblest and hardest that can be lived by man.”

“I think so too, mother!” The bright blue eyes sparkled with the ominous sparkle that in emotional natures invariably precedes tears.

She struggled against the semi-hysterical feeling for a few moments, as she had no desire to present a blurred and tear-stained visage to his observation when he came in. But it was no use; with a gasp, the tears of suppressed hope, love and suspense rose and fell.

Mrs. Maunders kept her eyes riveted on her knitting, discreetly, till Kathleen had recovered her composure. Her heart was full of sympathy and pity for her child, but for that child’s sake she did not dare to show it.

(“He’s obstinate among other things, and may cling to the forlorn hope of getting Flo, all his life,”) Mrs. Maunders was thinking, when they were startled by a sound of many feet rushing up the street, and by the loud ejaculation and hum of many voices. Involuntarily they both rushed to the street door—an unspoken dread of some evil having befallen Florence filling their hearts. A crowd was passing swiftly, bearing some object along in the midst of it. In answer to Mrs. Maunders’s almost frenzied inquiries, her fears were set at rest by dispirited answers from several stragglers. A gentleman had been knocked off his horse and half-murdered by a footpad, who had got off across the fields in the darkness.

She was stepping back into her house, murmuring the prayer of thanksgiving : “Thank God, not Florence !” when Doctor Sheffield came out from the thick of the crowd.

“Mrs. Maunders, you will be doing me a great service if you will let me have this poor fellow laid on a bed in your house ; there is no room prepared at my rough bachelor quarters. We won’t trouble you long. I’ve no doubt but that I shall be able to have him removed in a carriage to-morrow.”

“He spoke, and beckoned to the bearers of the injured man as he spoke. He took her consent so entirely for granted, that she would have felt as if she were acting inhumanly had she refused it. So Doctor Sheffield’s unconscious patient was carried up and laid on the bed in the spare chamber, which was painted and decorated entirely by the skilful fingers of the two daughters of the house. When his wounds were dressed, and he had quite recovered from the stunning effect of a blow on the side of his head from a blunt, heavy instrument, the patient was left under the soothing influence of a composing draught ; and his doctor went down and told Mrs. Maunders that the sufferer to whom she was extending her hospitality was “one of the young Kilburns—one of Lord Rollamore’s sons.”

“I shall go to Parkventon to-night, but I shall not allow either Lord or Lady Rollamore to see their son till the morning,” he added ; and Mrs. Maunders slightly bent her head in assent, and said,—

“In the meantime I will nurse Mr. Kilburn to the best of my ability. But I hope it will be neither a serious nor a long case.”

CHAPTER IV.

LORD ROLLAMORE IS GRATEFUL.

THERE was a good deal of gossip that night in Cadleton about the dramatic accident to one of the young Kilburns. Some of it was amiable and some of it unamiable, but it was all a little wide of the mark, as it is the manner of gossip to be very generally. Little of it was founded on fact, most of it was heavily ornamented with conjecture, and all of it was bristling with curiosity. Some good-natured people murmured that "it was a pity Lord Rollamore's sons should retain the almost forgotten traditions of their race, by rambling about in evil company at night;" and added, that "it was lucky for the injured young man that he was taken into the house of such an irreproachable person as Mrs. Maunders." Others, less good-natured, ignored the first part of the case altogether, but hoped that the enforced sojourn of Lord Rollamore's son in the widow's house would not end in his making a *mésalliance* with one of the widow's daughters. Just a few regarded the tramp as a myth, and half-hinted that "young Kilburn had been knocked off his horse and sustained the consequent injuries by too many brandies and sodas." And fewer still were content to acknowledge that they knew nothing whatever about the matter, and had no means of obtaining information.

The real facts of the case, though unpleasant to the "Young Kilburn" in question, were simple enough. In the afternoon, Fergus Kilburn, finding that he was

being rapidly rocked to sleep in the cradle of his race, Parkventon, had by an effort of memory, for which he blessed himself, remembered that he knew several of the fellows in a regiment then quartered in the Citadel. Failing to incite his brother to walk to the station, and go in to Plymouth by train, he had borrowed the venerable roadster that belonged to the steward, and ridden across many a mile of rough moorland, till he got into the Tavistock road, from which point to the Citadel was plain sailing. He had stayed, recalling old times, in Gib and Halifax, playing billiards and puffing cigarettes for an hour or two, and had started to ride back to Parkventon to dinner, just about the time of the first Parkventon dinner-gong sounding. He had tried two or three short cuts, which were easy as the alphabet to the men who knew them, but were puzzling to him as a stranger, owing to the peculiar resemblance every turn to which he came bore to the one he had lately passed. As he lost his way he lost his temper, and so, when a sturdy and insolent beggar advanced from a dark hedge and laid a detaining hand on the bridle while he demanded alms, he was met by a slash from the Honorable Fergus' hunting-crop, which transformed the beggar into a brute in an instant.

With a blow the tramp knocked his prey from the horse, and with a large smooth stone he strove to batter in the brains of the one who had not meekly accepted his (the tramp's) right to take when he had the power. Then hearing wheels approaching, he had possessed himself of Fergus' watch and purse, and disappeared over the hedge into the darkness, just as Dr. Sheffield drove up. It was not till he got back to Caddleton, and had a little crowd around himself and the man he had succored, that Dr. Sheffield learnt that the man was one of Lord Rollamore's sons. Then at once he

made up his mind that Mrs. Maunders should take the sufferer in. He could hardly tell himself why he desired to get "young Kilburn" under the shelter of the widow's roof. But he did desire it, and he did feel intuitively that "something would come of it. For one thing he felt that a patient in the house would give him the right of entrance to it more freely, and consequently bring him more frequently into contact with Florence. For another, he knew that Lord Rollamore would come there to see his son, and would then, in the nature of things, see Mrs. Maunders also.

This contingency was prominent in Mrs. Maunders's mind also. But she looked in the glass and faced it composedly. The plain cap that had succeeded to the widow's, surrounded a sweet, good, true face, that was very charming to the eyes of the many who knew and loved her well. But there was scarcely a trace left in it of the face that had met her vision when she looked in the glass quarter of a century ago.

"Time is very merciful," she said with a sigh; "more merciful in the changes he makes sometimes, than in leaving people apparently untouched."

She had not much time to spend in moralizing in solitude and idleness on this subject, for the patient in her spare room occupied her full attention for the remainder of that night, and the shop claimed her in the morning. When Dr. Sheffield sent a hospital nurse to take charge of the case. Kathleen and Florence went on with the home life, and the teaching life, just the same as before the accident, though, to the delight of the former, Dr. Sheffield was continually in and out.

Early in the day Lord and Lady Rollamore had both come over to see their son, and finding him comfortably quartered and manfully resigned to remaining where he was comfortable, they had gone away quite at peace in

their minds about him. His injuries were not very serious after all. One ankle was sprained, and they were assured that had the stone been used as a battering-ram against his head, one hair's-breadth to the right, the consequences would have been fatal. As it was, Dr. Sheffield predicted that with ease and quiet, his recovery would be speedy.

"And I can promise that he will have every care and perfect quiet here," he said gravely, addressing young Kilburn's mother.

To this her Ladyship replied graciously, that though she was "quite convinced of this," she still hoped that it wouldn't be necessary to tax the kindness of the excellent person who kept the shop for long.

"Of course everything will be ordered for my son from Parkventon; but his occupying their room must be an inconvenience to them," she said considerately.

And then Dr. Sheffield, with a grim sense of the humor of the situation, inquired if "Lady Rollamore would not like to see and thank Mrs. Maunders herself."

"Certainly, unquestionably!" Lord Rollamore answered, after his habit, for his wife. "We had better see her, and give the good woman to understand that she will be remunerated for any trouble or inconvenience which my son's occupancy of her room may cause her."

Dr. Sheffield smiled his grave acquiescent smile, and led the way into the drawing-room, where he left them while he went to summon Mrs. Maunders to the interview, for which she had nerved herself by a look in the glass.

"Lady Rollamore wishes to express her gratitude to you—she is up in the drawing-room."

She looked up from her occupation of sorting the

November magazines, and addressing them to the respective subscribers, and for the first time since he had known her, he read in her face an expression of steady, proud power, which was a quality he had recognized in her daughter Florence.

“Tell Lady Rollamore that my duties chain me to the counter just now. She needn’t express gratitude for the little I have done or can do for her son. I would do the same for anyone.”

“You’ll make them uncomfortable—they’ll fancy you want to avoid them,” he said, and she instantly dropped the magazines, and followed him up to the room in which he had left them.

Lady Rollamore was standing sideways to the window, through which she was studying Caddleton ways and people, facing the door. Her husband, who, though he had been the one to order the interview, for the expression of the Rollamore sense of gratitude, felt the whole thing to be a bore, was turning over the pages of a large photograph album, when Mrs. Maunders came in and stood quietly waiting for one of them to speak.

In a moment the prospect of offering some slight compensation to the excellent person vanished from Lady Rollamore’s mind. But her noble spouse was by nature more obtuse, and by habit and constant practice, more regardless of the feelings of others. He closed the album abruptly,—it annoyed him that he should have been caught in the act of showing the faintest interest in the excellent person’s belongings.

“Lady Rollamore wished to see and thank you, and give you to understand that your kindness will not be unrequited. We shall certainly, all of us, remember and recognize it. Meanwhile, we should wish matters to be managed for Mr. Fergus Kilburn’s comfort here

precisely as if he had agreed upon taking the lodgings on your own terms before the accident."

"But Rollamore!" Lady Rollamore began, advancing hastily, her face scarlet from the mortification and pain she felt at the blunder he was making. But Mrs. Maunders's unruffled cold tones cut in and made themselves heard above her Ladyship's.

"Your Lordship is most considerate; the bill shall be made out when Mr. Fergus Kilburn goes away."

"Meanwhile, let his mother thank you," Lady Rollamore whispered, and she put her hand out and touched the widow's.

"Which was a foolish and effusive thing to do," Lord Rollamore remarked, when he got his wife to himself in the carriage. "I don't like the look of that woman at all. Someone tells me she has good-looking daughters; and you know what Fergus is."

"A staunch conservative—"

"Ah, well! I can only tell you that I've known a stauncher social conservative than Fergus ready to ruin his prospects for a pretty face."

"Fergus is far too much like you to be a liberal in matrimony, whatever he may be in love," she answered good-temperedly.

It was the only bit of sarcasm in which she dared to indulge herself.

"Fergus mustn't think of marrying any one for some years to come, unless a girl with a big fortune drops from the clouds within his reach. As for Gilbert, he ought to be thinking of marrying, but there must be money—money!"

"Gilbert at least may afford to please himself."

"Don't talk nonsense!" He spoke dejectedly, not crossly, and this being a new departure in his manner it roused her attention.

“Why, Rollamore,” she said sympathetically, “you are surely inventing disagreeables. You were rich before you married me; and I was not a poor woman, and our boys have never been extravagant.”

“Gilbert will have to keep up the title—you forget that,” he said uneasily.

“And he will have more than his grandfather, and as much as his father had to do it on.”

A slight strain of anxiety mingled with her tenderness as she said this, and he responded to it pettishly :

“There, there! drop the subject; it’s one that no woman ever properly grasped yet. Only mark what I say, Lady Rollamore, if you encourage your eldest son to make a moneyless marriage, you’ll both live to repent it. After all, I thank God that it’s Fergus who is laid up in that woman’s house. What *he* does isn’t of so much consequence.”

“What *has* caused this sudden outbreak of parental fears?” she asked laughingly. “You haven’t seen Mrs. Maunders’s daughters! Why should you dread their attractions?”

“I saw a photo of one in that album, and it reminded me of a girl I once knew—she’s dead long ago—who was a devil of witchery. That’s why and how. Don’t say any more about it.”

CHAPTER V.

DR. SHEFFIELD PLAYS HIS FIRST TRUMP.

It was a week since Fergus Kilburn’s disagreeable encounter with the tramp, who had battered and robbed him. Still the offender was at large, “in spite of the utmost vigilance and well organized efforts of the

police," according to the local papers. And still Dr. Sheffield's patient was unfit to be removed from Mrs. Maunders's house, in spite of the most untiring and incessant medical skill.

To say that the widow was pleased that the invalid should still remain in her house, would be to assert too much. But she was resigned to it, and able to root out the impatience which her soul had felt after that brief interview with his father and mother. When in her first hour of wrath and mortification she had permitted herself to repeat to her daughters the words and tone of business-like superiority with which Lord Rollamore had offered her payment for what she had done, they were disposed to ask the hospital nurse to pack up the Honorable Fergus and remove him as soon as possible. But a little quiet reflection showed them that this would be a crude admission of being chagrined, as well as an act of cruelty to the unfortunate young man. But though they banished the desire for revenge, they could not succeed in banishing the remembrance of the insult.

"He must have seen you were a lady. No one could look at you for a moment, or hear you speak, without knowing that," Kathleen said.

"And if he's a Christian, he must have felt that a fellow-christian could have done no less than mother did. To his assuming that vile dross was her motive, shows he has but a heathenish heart. Confess, mother! didn't you hate him when he spoke to you in that way?"

Mrs. Maunders looked far more thoughtful than the occasion warranted as she answered:—

"I must confess that I despise Lord Rollamore."

"Does he know that you're a doctor's widow?" Kathleen asked. The position of doctor's widow

ranked next only in her estimation to that of a doctor's wife.

Her mother laughed.

"My dear child, do understand that Lord Rollamore, if he took the trouble to know or think about us at all, would probably rank us with the widow and children of his late butler ; and I don't blame him," she added shortly. "To do so is merely to be true to the social creed which he and his fathers before him have been taught and professed."

"You said just now you despised him, and now you say that you 'don't blame him.'"

"I'll own that I'm not very consistent to-day ; will that satisfy you, and shall we finish our dinner in order that I may take the nurse's place for a time while she has a walk.

"Mother, you're not going to turn yourself into a servant for this young man? Let Lord Rollamore send another nurse, if two are wanted. Why should *you* wait on him."

"Because he is here helpless to be waited upon, Kathleen, and because the nurse, being a human being and not merely an intelligent machine, requires rest, food and exercise—none of which she can take in a sick-room."

"Does Doctor Sheffield know—"

"Yes, Doctor Sheffield does know," her mother said good-temperedly. "Now you'll believe there is no degradation in my doing what I can to help."

"As if degradation and you could ever be named in the same day, mother," Florence said hastily. "I wish I could help you."

"So you can—stay in the shop for the next hour, Flo. Miss Cophlete promised to come in and do her best while I relieved the nurse, but I shall feel better

satisfied if I know you are there ; such a number of magazines have to be sent out to-day."

"At least," Mrs. Maunders thought, as she was wending her way up to the sick-room, "there's no fear of Lord Rollamore's coming into the shop to-day, so Flo may safely be there." The widow felt a sense of absolute relief in the conviction she had that Lord Rollamore, having paid the one duty visit to his injured son, would give Caddleton a wide berth for some time to come. She quite forgot the probability of the advent of another member of the family at Parkventon. In fact, she had only heard of one "young Kilburn" as yet, and he was safe under her own eye in her spare bedroom.

She seated herself by the side of the sleeping man, and fell to wondering if he were "the elder of Lady Rollamore's two sons—if he were the heir to the title and large landed property which was entailed in the Kilburn family?" And as she looked on him, and thought, "What a dear good face the boy has," her heart began to ache dully again with that heavy, depressing, half-remorseful ache which always oppressed it when she thought of Lord Rollamore and his family. "I am suffering as much for that early cowardice as if I had committed a crime," she told herself. It was true ! She was suffering more from the regret that never slept for having been weakly generous and foolishly afraid, than many women would have suffered from the memory of a crime, or the sorrow for a sin.

The hospital nurse went out for her ordered walk, followed for some distance by all the little idle boys in Caddleton, who regarded her long gray cloak and bonnet as belonging to the same order of iniquity as the "Old Guy" whom they were wont to burn with religious zeal on the 5th of every November. One of the

boldest and most enlightened spirits among the little crowd went so far as to heave a half-eaten cider apple at her, and shout, "Theer go an old nun!" But on her turning round, laughingly picking up the apple and sending it back to him with a well-directed aim that made his fat cheek sting, they discontinued their attentions, and looked elsewhere for amusement.

Kathleen was out giving music lessons. Doctor Sheffield had seen her pass his house about half-past two—immediately after the nurse, in fact. He knew that Mrs. Maunders would be sitting with his patient, and he had heard that Miss Cophlete would be attending to the shop. It would be a good opportunity for having a few words with Florence! For before putting the pressure, which he felt he had it in his power to put, upon Mrs. Maunders, he thought it best to plead his own cause verbally with the girl, who probably didn't know her own mind.

Before going out, he stepped back into a little private room behind the surgery, which had been the late Doctor Maunders's sanctum, and was now the cosy nook in which Doctor Sheffield spent his quiet evenings. One of the prettiest pieces of furniture in the quaintly picturesque little room was an old brass-handled bureau, in which the account-books of the late medical practitioner had been, and those of the present one were kept. "There are no secret drawers in it; it has only been used for business-books, papers, and letters," the widow had said to him when handing him the key years ago. But though there were no secret drawers, he had found something inside the cover of a book which neither the man he had succeeded nor the widow of that man would have had him find for all the poor little worldly wealth of which they were possessed. And that something was a little letter!—a mere little

tender epistolary burst of gratitude and affection, which Mrs. Maunders had once written to her husband during one of her brief absences from home.

This letter Doctor Sheffield now read over carefully. "It is very little, but enough for my purpose, I think," he said to himself. Then he smiled as he thought that, though if it came to a point, he would not hurt a hair of Mrs. Maunders's head, or, more correctly speaking, a fibre of her heart. Yet he was ready to push her to the extremity of that point for the sake of forcing her to use her influence with her daughter—an influence which, if used successfully even, would only force an unwilling wife into his arms.

He replaced the letter, re-locked the bureau, picked up his list of visits for the afternoon round, and walked off to pay his first, after ordering his man to call for him at Mrs. Maunders's door in three-quarters of an hour. He went in through the shop to save time, and found Miss Cophlete sitting in amiable bewilderment behind the counter, and Florence writing down an order for various newspapers and periodicals which a servant in the Rollamore livery was giving. She looked up and greeted him heartily.

"I'm so glad you've come in ; here's a note for Mr. Kilburn ; the man says he's to wait for an answer, and mother gave orders that no one was to disturb the sick-room till the nurse came in. What shall I do ?"

"Give me the note," he said, walking out and upstairs to the drawing-room as he spoke. As Florence had the note in her hand, she was obliged to follow him.

As she passed into the room, he shut the door and took her hand.

"Florence," he began, very gently, "don't look frightened ; I am a pertinacious, but not a rough lover.

Your letter was written hastily. Tell me that I may destroy and forget it ! ”

“ Do—do—be just as we have always been,” she said, hurriedly, and she managed to slip her hand away from his, and retreat a yard or two.

“ That’s absurd,” he said, more sharply than it was judicious for a lover who was not sure of his ground to speak. “ I will gladly destroy and forget your letter, if you will tell me now that you will write me a kinder one ; or, better still, if you will say kinder words to me now. I love you very much, Florence ; tell me you will try——”

She came nearer, and held her face towards him.

“ Look at me,” she said, earnestly. “ Do I look as if I was speaking the truth ?—do I look as if I am half-frightened ?—because I am.”

He stared at her wonderingly, and said,—

“ You do ! but why ? ”

“ I’ll tell you why,” she interrupted. “ Doctor Sheffield, you have known us, Kathleen and me, since we were little children, and you’ve always been kind, equally kind, to us both. But you have never done anything to make me look upon you as a lover.”

“ I have asked you to marry me.”

“ That was only yesterday ; I am speaking of all the years I’ve known you. Why should *I* love you any more than Kathleen does ? ”

“ Because I love you, and never shall love her.” He rang out the words loudly in his bitter disappointment, and the sound, though not the sense of them, brought Mrs. Maunders, with her fingers on her lip, from the sick-room.

“ Hush ! you noisy doctor, you have startled your patient from his sleep—come in. Oh, a letter for him is there ?—well, you will deliver it ? ”

She spoke quickly and tried to get him away, but he thought he saw his opportunity, and took it. Half despising himself for the meanness, he still acted meanly.

“I was asking Florence to give me another answer than she gave me in her letter yesterday. Mrs. Maunders, I love your daughter, Florence, so well, that I will stop at nothing—at *nothing*—that may influence her to accept me for her husband. You, knowing this, will help me—for all our sakes.”

He spoke earnestly, respectfully, but with a meaning emphasis that struck vague doubt into the daughter's heart, vague fear into the mother's. Again Mrs. Maunders asked herself the question, “Does he know little or much? *everything*, or only a dangerous part?” And again she had to admit that, without his aid, which she did not dare to ask, she could not answer that question in any way.

“I can say nothing more to-day. I must have time to speak to Florence,” Mrs. Maunders said hurriedly, forgetting in her agitation that she had as yet said nothing on the subject. But the answer quite satisfied Doctor Sheffield. He was not an inconsiderate tyrant, impatient to have his will worked at any cost to the workers of it. He was only a man who wanted to have one woman for his wife and another woman's help to make her so. And he meant to have what he wanted—if he could.

CHAPTER VI.

GILBERT IS INTRODUCED TO FLORENCE AND FEVER.

THE people at Parkventon, the neighborhood observed with pleasure, were being re-established in the old family seat in a most promising manner. The stables were filled with horses. The gardening staff was augmented, and three or four new vineries and pineries were planted, to the joy of the local builder and glazier who had the job. A large portion of the house was re-decorated and re-furnished. These latter things, not to the delight of the local decorators and cabinet makers,—for Lord Rollamore put these important matters in the hands of London firms, who sent down their own artists to re-design, and re-construct, and re-arrange the interior of the mansion. Rumors were rife of a houseful of grand company at Christmas, and the younger hearts among the county people beat high in anticipation of a colossal ball on a colossal scale of magnificence and sumptuously artistic expenditure.

For a short time Lady Rollamore took little notice of the lavish departure into hitherto unknown realms of extravagance. Her thoughts were greatly occupied with her two sons—with Fergus, who was still suffering in body, and with Gilbert, who was disturbed in mind.

She was not in any very painful anxiety about Fergus. She saw him daily, saw that he was as well nursed and cared for as if he had been at home, and knew that he was absolutely ignorant of the attractiveness of the two daughters who had been deemed possibly dangerous to

him by his father. As for the fluctuations in his case, they were neither unnatural nor alarming. Whenever he felt better for an hour or two he would talk, and then his head would get much worse, and he would relapse into dull painful stupor for a time. And as soon as he thought his ankle was well, he tried it by springing out of bed, thereby re-spraining it, and causing himself and nurses much unnecessary pain and trouble.

Nevertheless, on the whole, he was progressing favorably, and was quite happy and moderately contented. He was delighted with his doctor, who would often give him an unprofessional hour, pleased with his nurse, and interested in Mrs. Maunders. Lady Rollamore would have been glad to see him about and able to join the bright home life for a few weeks before joining his ship for the gunnery course, but she was not poignantly, grievously anxious about him as she was about Gilbert.

This, too, not on account of anything Gilbert was doing or had done or left undone. But because some of his views were opposed—righteously enough—to his father's, and his actions would soon be shown to the world to correspond to his views.

Because of these things, and because of something else of which Gilbert knew nothing yet. This last trouble was a subtle and essentially womanly one. It was one that perhaps only a woman who is a mother can appreciate. And this was the knowledge she had of his father's intention of working upon Gilbert to the uttermost of his power to make him marry a girl who was not congenial to him.

Lady Rollamore had only just obtained this very painful and demoralizing knowledge, and it made every thing—the bright home atmosphere, the lavish expendi-

ture, the comfort and beauty and luxury of all about her—seem hollow and unreal! Why, if these things were, if this extravagant display of pomp and vanity and wealth were profitable? Why should the heir to it all be in danger of being goaded or persuaded, beguiled or coerced into making a marriage that would be distasteful—perhaps detestable—to him?

The knowledge had come upon her unexpectedly. Her husband had, in fact, been exasperated into imparting it to her by some reasonable protests she was making against the magnitude and scale of expenditure of the projected ball.

“I understand what I’m about. It’s necessary that Mrs. Torrens should see that we don’t mind flinging our hundreds away in pleasure, or we shall never get her thousands into the family.”

“But, Rollamore, the woman is odious to me, her mock piety, her vulgar worldliness, her *utter* unreality,—you can’t contemplate—”

“Getting my son to marry her daughter—but I do. Now it’s no use throwing up your hands and looking distracted. I know better what’s good, what’s *needful* for my boy than you do, and I tell you that it’s needful for Gilbert to marry a millionaire’s heiress. *Her* mother, the Torrens’s girl’s mother, is willing so far, but if you and your son give yourself any confounded airs of aversion, or even of indifference, the scheme will be exploded, and you’ll have the satisfaction of knowing that you’ve ruined your son.”

“I will be heard, I will raise my voice against so unwarrantable a scheme. Miss Torrens is a girl of whom neither Gilbert’s heart nor judgment could approve—”

“Bother his heart and his judgment,” Lord Rollamore interrupted angrily; “If I have an ounce of authority over my son she shall be his wife—she’d do

anything to be 'Lady Rollamore'—he'll rue it to the last day of his life if he resists my authority, for in spite of his theories, he's as little fitted to cope with poverty as any of you."

"He never could be called upon to cope with poverty—he is your heir—"

"How you harp on that," he said, speaking and looking at her more savagely than he had ever spoken or looked at her before. "How you'll repent thwarting me, and interfering with my plans for the happy—for the good of my children when I'm gone."

"Oh, don't threaten me so awfully," she said shuddering; "trust me, don't threaten me, Rollamore. You know that with all my heart and soul and strength I will go with you in any efforts you make for the happiness, for the real good of our children. But this passion for more wealth at any price, no, no, I can't share it or encourage it, or do anything but hope and pray that my son may not fall a victim to it."

So the father and mother were at variance, and in spite of all the splendor, there was little peace at Park-venton.

Though nothing has been said of their visits to him, it must not be supposed that Fergus Kilburn's brother and sisters neglected him; on the contrary, they paid him daily calls, but as these calls and what transpired during them have had nothing hitherto to do with the story, they have not been recorded. But on the day after the strife of tongues between Lord and Lady Rollamore, Gilbert Kilburn went to see his brother, and while on his way to him, some things material to the furtherance of the story of the fortunes of the Kilburn family did happen.

He met Florence Maunders, and he heard from Doctor Sheffield that fever had broken out in some cottages

belonging to his father at Wreymouth End, in consequence of the faulty sanitary arrangements, and dilapidated condition of the cottages generally.

He was hearing this—hearing with a grieved spirit of the dirt and poverty, the sickness unrelieved and squalor unrebuked and unremedied which existed on this portion of his father's estate from Doctor Sheffield, and unconsciously the story of sordid misery was setting its stamp on his character—and so on his life—when another element that was to be very potent with him was introduced, also by Dr. Sheffield.

“I see Mrs. Maunders's daughter just ahead of us, Mr. Kilburn; I'll join you again in a moment, if you'll allow me.”

The two men had been walking along together when this interruption occurred. Gilbert had cut across by a field-path from Parkventon into the Caddleton Road, and had then been overtaken by the doctor on his way back from visiting the fever-stricken Wreymouth patients.

“Will you introduce me to Miss Maunders? I have had the pleasure of seeing and thanking Mrs. Maunders for her goodness to my brother, but I have not been introduced to the younger ladies of the family yet.”

Doctor Sheffield was pleased. He intended to marry Florence, though he had not received one word or sign of encouragement from her, therefore it was quite in the polite and proper order of things that the future Lord Rollamore should solicit an introduction to the local doctor's future wife. He effected this introduction with an air of tender, manly proprietorship in the girl which was very perceptible to Mr. Kilburn, and which amused him at the time, and annoyed him later on. At the same time he observed, with a certain sense of satisfaction, that the young lady was neither embar-

rassed nor self-conscious, nor very much pleased at meeting with her friend.

“I’m on my way to call on my brother,” Gilbert explained ; “he’s getting on so fast, thanks to the excellent nursing and doctoring he has had, that we shall be able to relieve you all of him in a few days, I suppose.”

Florence felt that there was neither suppressed patronage nor a desire to discharge the obligations of the Kilburn family to the Maunders’s with money, so she let herself answer as her impulse dictated.

“My mother is the only one of the family who has had any trouble with your brother, and she likes him so much that, I think, she’ll be quite sorry when he’s well enough to go.”

“How is he? Have you seen him to-day?” Gilbert asked, and Florence’s clear, dark cheek crimsoned as she answered,—

“Indeed, neither I nor my sister have seen him at all. My mother has helped the nurse, and we have helped my mother when we could by attending to the shop.”

“She needn’t have dragged ‘the shop’ in,” Doctor Sheffield thought. He did not exactly dislike the idea of his future mother-in-law keeping a shop, but the idea was an angel that he did not always entertain well when taken unawares. On the present occasion, for instance, he was just feeling that it was quite an agreeable thing to get about the place that he and his future wife were taking a friendly stroll with Lord Rollamore’s heir! “A nice young fellow,” the doctor pronounced Gilbert to be ; “a young fellow with no nonsense about him. He’s sure to get his mother and sisters to call on Florence when we’re married.” It was jarring that into the midst of these reflections should cut Florence’s crude reference to “the shop.”

“ It’s generally a case of ‘ the labor we delight in physics pain ’ with the people who have to do anything for Fergus,” Gilbert Kilburn went on ; “ he’s such an inexhaustible cheerful fellow. My mother used to call him her ‘ heart of feather ’ when we were children in the nursery ; and when we used to fight and give each other black eyes, he was always so bright and affable about it, that it was invariably taken for granted that I was the one to blame in the matter.”

“ My mother was telling us that he has the great charm of always assuming that every one likes him, and he’s got a lovely, forgiving nature. He told my mother this morning that if that poor wretch who half murdered and robbed him was caught, he should try to beg him off, for most likely he was hungry.”

“ I’ve no sentiment about the tramp myself ; he was a cowardly brute to use a stone on the head of a man who was down. I hope he’ll be caught soon, for it’s not a pleasant reflection that he may be about our paths even now, come to the end of his resources, and, as Fergus would plead, hungry enough to justify him in attacking some one else.”

“ I hope when he is caught that he will turn out to be a stranger, and not one of these parts ; but I don’t think that we have any desperate characters ‘ growing on the soil ’ round here.”

“ I don’t know, Florence,” Doctor Sheffield said, in his best-weighed words and manner, “ there are some ruffianly fellows down at Wreymouth End. They’ve not been grown on the soil, but they have come to live there under the promise of work, and now the work has failed them, and their dog kennels of houses are filled with fever. Half the people down there are starving.”

“ Why ? ” Gilbert asked.

“The work they relied upon having through the winter had failed.”

“What work was that?”

“In the marble quarries on Lord Rollamore’s estate,” Doctor Sheffield answered, speaking distinctly. He had no wish to hurt the feelings of the Honorable Gilbert Kilburn, but he was determined that the heir to the property should know the tyranny that the agent for the property was exercising over the wretched employees. “The work has been stopped by Mr. Wilson until such time as the men will take half wages. If they accept these terms, they’ll starve slowly. Until they do accept them, they are starving fast.”

“It is impossible my father can know of this. I pledge myself that the wrong shall be righted at once,” Gilbert said earnestly. “You see we have been here for so short a time, my father has had no time to look into things for himself, but I pledge myself this monstrous state of things shall exist no longer. Lord Rollamore would wish me to act for him instantly in a case of this sort. If I could see Mr. Wilson—he lives down here at Caddleton, I believe?”

“You won’t find him at home at this hour, Mr. Kilburn. Moreover, he would tell you what he told me, probably, that he was acting under Lord Rollamore’s orders. Mr. Wilson is not a hard man generally. You must remember he is only the agent.”

“Then I will go to my father,” Gilbert said, and he did not see the expression of resigned incredulity, or, perhaps, more correctly speaking, of dogged doubt which overspread Doctor Sheffield’s face.

“Lord Rollamore probably has good reasons for giving the order. I only—as the parish doctor—tell you of the miserable state of things physically which the carrying out of that order has caused. As you say,

probably Lord Rollamore knows nothing of the effect, and may feel that his agent's account of things justify the action. In fact, Mr. Kilburn, I'm afraid absenteeism won't work better in England than it has done in Ireland. You're not annoyed at my plain speaking, I hope?"

"On the contrary," Gilbert said, warmly, "I'm obliged to you for having used the spur. If I can neither find the agent nor influence my father, I can at least go down to Wreymouth End and try and help the people myself."

"Oh, there's fever there, don't go!" Florence said, hastily.

It was a relief to her that they had reached her mother's door as she spoke, for Doctor Sheffield began explaining to her that if Mr. Kilburn took proper precautions, he might go with the same safety as he—Dr. Sheffield—himself did.

"And you know you're never nervous on my account—very sensibly," he added.

Mr. Kilburn heard these words as he was mounting the stairs to his brother's room, and thought, "And she never will be nervous on your account, my good fellow. I'm sorry for you."

Gilbert Kilburn had a long and serious conversation with his brother that day. When he was leaving, the younger brother said,—

"For heaven's sake don't tell him what you're going to do till I've joined my ship. The house won't hold him—though he is building a good bit to it," he added, with a laugh.

"Building on to it, though it's as big as a barrack already, and compelling the wretched tenants of the Wreymouth End property to herd like cattle, to the de-

struction of their bodies and souls, in those pestilential kennels."

"Don't pose as a reformer till you're independent of the governor, Gilbert. If you run counter to him, he'll cut down your allowance, and make the mother suffer—he always did."

"I can never be more independent of him than I am now."

"Yes, you can; you may marry money. The girls tell me Mrs. Torrens and her daughter are coming at Christmas, and we all know what that means."

"An immense amount of constraint and humbug, generally; nothing more, as far as I'm concerned."

"May Torrens isn't a bad girl. I have only seen her once or twice, but I should think she knows how many half-loaves make a whole as well as any one."

"Bad or good, she's uninteresting to me," Gilbert said, as he slowly rose and picked up his hat and stick.

"I shall be glad to have you home, old fellow; good-bye till to-morrow."

"Here," Fergus called out, "take this book down to the library below, and ask one of the daughters to pick me out a good thriller."

CHAPTER VII.

MRS. TORRENS'S PET.

CHRISTMAS was rapidly approaching—full of fun, and frolic, and festivity for some—full of furtive fears and dismal despondency for others. This divergence of feeling and sentiment on the approach of Christmas is almost entirely due to the power of the purse. Those with gold in the latter can meet the great annual season

of reckoning and settlement with a smiling visage. Those about whose purses not even the unsavory odor of the proverbial brass farthing hangs, are apt to regard the joviality and good cheer, the peace and good-will, as so many exploded myths.

This Christmas that was approaching was full of promise of very pleasant things to Mrs. Torrens, the widow of a recently deceased and enormously wealthy city man, whose personalty had been sworn as under four hundred thousand pounds about twelve months ago. With the dead Mr. Torrens this story has nothing whatever to do. One thing only need be recorded of him, and that is, that he was the most patiently devoted, kindly confiding, absolutely trusting husband that ever fell to the lot of a scheming, suspicious, grasping narrow-minded wife.

He had married her for love in her not unattractive girlhood, and he had loved her steadily for thirty years, during which time riches had increased upon him beyond his wildest expectations. She was always prudent, and given to the practising of small economics that did not interfere with her own comfort in any way, and these practices led him into the error of fancying that she was wise beyond the wisdom of other women in the dispensation of wealth. Accordingly, when he died, though he loved his only daughter dearly, he loved his wife still more, and trusted her entirely; to this extent, namely, that he left everything he possessed in the world to her, unconditionally, being "convinced," he said, that her true heart and judgment would lead her to dispose of it more wisely and usefully than he could himself.

The daughter, May, did not trouble herself much about the matter when the will was first made public. The girl had been accustomed to be dependent on her

parents all her life. It was of little consequence that she should go on being dependent on the one parent that remained, especially as over that parent she had considerable sway. But, as time went on, May sometimes found herself wishing that her father had put it in her power to please herself, should her pleasure ever be in opposition to her mother's will. Little obstacles rose in her path that had never been there while her kind old father had been alive. Little economics were at first suggested, and then enforced, which had never been permitted in his time. And at length it came to the pass of the girl discovering that, though Mrs. Torrens was her mother, she was her mistress too.

The widow still lived in the handsome mansion at Surbiton, which her late husband had rented for a long term, and been on the point of purchasing when he died. It was a great, grand house, full of luxuriously-comfortable furniture, and costly, precious works of art. In Mr. Torrens's days, it had been a temple of hearty hospitality, the exercise of which had often wrung Mrs. Torrens's penurious soul. For though this lady loved to have an obsequious crowd of satellites about her, she would have preferred to feed them cheaply, and give them small beer to drink at luncheon instead of wine of rare vintages. Now that things were entirely in her own hands, she pleaded her widowhood as an excuse for only entertaining in the simplest way. Accordingly, many of those who had been *habitués* of the house during Mr. Torrens's life and reign drifted apart from his widow, partly because they did not want to see her, and even more because she did not want to see them.

But there was one who had been a familiar friend in the millionaire's life-time who retained his footing, and was a very familiar friend of the widow's still. This was

a man whom one would not have suspected, at the first flash of reflection on the subject, to be at all likely to become an object of interest to either the deceased stockbroker or his wife. But Mr. White, æsthetic painter, dreamy poet as he was understood to be, had taken their measure accurately on a first introduction, and, as he admitted to himself, "they fitted him like a glove."

He had been made known to them through the mediumship of an Aldermanic friend of theirs, whose portrait, or rather the portrait of whose robes, he was painting in a casual way.

"You want your wife's portrait painted, Torrens? Take my advice, and have White do it; the man who's painting me, you know. He's a capital fellow, a good deal of genius about him; and has been rather unfairly treated, I fancy, by those fellows on the press who call themselves critics—fellows who'd sell their souls for a mess of pottage, you know, and who know about as much of art as—as my coachman does."

Mr. Torrens had said in reply to this that he would think about it, and Mrs. Torrens had conjectured that, "as the young man was not well-known yet, he would probably be moderate in his charges." The end of it was that Mr. White did paint the portrait of the self-satisfied lady, in a manner that made her regard him as a young man of immense promise and ability, for the portrait was that of a stately, graceful, benign lady; and yet admiring friends were found ready to declare that "it was a life-like and speaking likeness."

After this, Mr. White discreetly spoke of Mrs. Torrens as "his patroness" to people who were sure to tell her of it again, and this pleased her so that he soon found in her a ready market for all such works as he could not dispose of elsewhere, by the simple expedient

of telling her that while he was working at such-and-such a view or interior, he was thinking of her talk and critical judgment, and striving to work up to it.

He was a young man, not thirty yet, tall "and slovenly," May called him; Mrs. Torrens preferred to describe him as "slender and willowy." He wore his dark hair rather long, and spoke in deep, slow tones, and altogether affected the manner of the æsthetes without being possessed of the talent which made one tolerate the leaders of that phase of absurdity while it lasted. For, though he sold average pictures, and published poems that were on a par with the majority that drip from the press, a brutal doubt had been disseminated that they were not the offspring of his own hand and brain. "Some one in greater need than himself," it was said, in more or less plain language, "did for a wage do work for him that he foisted on the public as genuine."

It was a horrible accusation, and to an extremely high-minded and honorable man would have been crushing. Mrs. Torrens was ready at any moment to take her oath that Mr. White was both high-minded and honorable; nevertheless, he remained uncrushed by the tainting accusation. Indeed, just about this time he was not only uncrushed, but remarkably cheerful, Mrs. Torrens said, and she had a good opportunity of judging, for he was established comfortably in an extemporized studio at her house, "The Rise," making sketches for a set of views of her favorite "bits," as she called them.

Mrs. Torrens was enchanted at having him for a guest, for several reasons. One was that her love of small economics was run hard by her love of ostentation. It had a sweet sound in her ears, and gave her a sensation of being possessed of almost regal power

when she heard herself tell casual acquaintances that she "had a distinguished painter staying in the house whose services she had retained, she hoped, for some months to come."

"It is one of my little charities to encourage the struggling and deserving whenever I meet with them," she would say, with a self-satisfied, saintly smile.

And as the people to whom she said this refrained from telling her that they thought her a humbug, she had the additional pleasure of fancying they believed.

Another reason was that, by this charitable course, she felt she was establishing a claim on this young man,—a claim on his selfishness, if not on his gratitude,—and she wanted to establish a claim on him.

He was a young man, handsome, interesting, and clever (she believed), and she was a fat, ruddy, commonplace woman, who would never see fifty-five again. Nevertheless, she liked to persuade herself that his adulation was paid to herself, not to her money. Her husband had loved and been slavish to her "for herself only" all his life. Why not this young man, who assured her that he preferred spending a quiet evening with her to going to any of those crowded and dazzling *re-unions* in London, where, according to himself, he was the idol of the hour? She believed him. She wished to believe him, and a woman can constrain herself to believe anything she wishes in these cases.

But there was contention between herself and May in consequence of his continued presence at The Rise. Shortly after her husband's death, she had contemplated handing May and a huge fortune to Mr. White, with her blessing, and Mr. White had liked the prospect. But to May it had been unendurable.

"I wouldn't marry that sickly, lackadaisical creature

if there wasn't another man left for me in the world," May had said with vigor.

The young lady had just been visiting an old school-fellow bride, whose husband was quartered at Aldershot, and was suffering mildly from "barrackitis" when her mother made the proposition to her. At first Mrs. Torrens was disposed to be rather angry, but she soon forgave May's refusal to marry her favorite. What she could not so easily forgive was May's aversion to his presence in the house.

"There's one comfort, when we go to Parkventon, we shall get rid of Mr. White," Miss Torrens remarked, with injudicious out-spokenness in a fit of annoyance at her mother's making some engagement with him an excuse for not going up to an Albert Hall concert.

"I wish you would remember, my dear child, that Mr. White's presence is a great pleasure to me, and always was also to your dear father."

"Poor dear papa! He would have welcomed a hippopotamus for as long as it chose to stay, if you had asked him to do it."

"And *he* was the *master* of the house, May," Mrs. Torrens said significantly.

"You mean that you are the mistress of it entirely, and *I* am nothing," May said, with sudden anger. "At least I think that you might consider my happiness and wishes before those of Mr. White. I am your own child! He is nothing, and never will be anything, to you."

"He is a great help and comfort to me. More like a brother to me than a new friend."

"Oh, mamma! A 'brother' to you. To *you*! An affected young jackanapes like that!"

"I insist, May, upon your speaking more respectfully of one of my best and truest friends," Mrs. Tor-

rens said, speaking with laborious politeness and deliberation, and this manner of her mother's irritated the already exasperated girl into replying,—

“ You may insist upon anything in reason, mamma, but you can't insist on my being respectful to such a poor silly copy of a rather silly type. I hate the man ! He's a feeble sham. I shall be delighted to get to Park-venton to shake him off.”

Mrs. Torrens glowered in silent anger at her daughter, and resolved that, as that young lady was going to be given the chance of attaining to great glory and honor by marrying Lord Rollamore's heir, she would give herself the pleasure of extorting an invitation from Lord and Lady Rollamore for her *protege* as well.

CHAPTER VIII.

MR. WHITE THE ARTIST.

GILBERT KILBURN and his father had fallen into the ugly error of misunderstanding one another. There had been an open dispute between them on a point on which each man believed his own opinion to be the only one worth having on the subject. This point had been Gilbert's selection of a career, and his final and fixed resolve to enter upon it.

On the side of the son, there was this to be said, he had a strong, conscientious conviction that what he felt impelled to do was right in the highest sense of the word. On the side of the father, it may be argued that he had the strongest possible feeling that what Gilbert intended doing was utterly inexpedient from the prudent and worldly point of view. In each man there

was a strong element of that firmness which is hardly to be distinguished from obstinacy. This quality came well to the fore in both of them at this crisis, and Lady Rollamore's life was not a happy one.

The cause of rupture had been simmering and seething in the family cauldron for some time before it boiled over. It has been said that Gilbert had debts, which his father promised to pay on condition the young man remained contentedly at Parkventon for the winter months. Being unable to meet his liabilities in any other way, the young man had agreed to remain at Parkventon, but he could not bring himself to say or to affect that he did it contentedly. On the contrary, he declared that in remaining even for so short a time he was disregarding his duty:

"Five years ago you thought it your duty to walk the hospitals, and after wasting your time in them for two years, you thought it your duty to get called to the Bar. Now you tell me you feel it your duty to take orders in the Church. If there was a good family living waiting for you, I could understand this phase of madness. As there isn't, and we haven't a shred of Church interest, it's *my* duty to try and cure it," Lord Rollamore said, working himself into a chilly passion as he spoke, and Gilbert answered,--

"I don't look forward to ever holding a living. I don't want one. You'll understand it better when I tell you that I feel my strength will be in working among outcasts. I shall try, after twelve months at a Theological College, to get a title to Orders in one of the East End London parishes, and when I'm priested I shall try to get licensed as a missionary. Now you'll understand that I don't want interest and patronage at my back in taking Holy Orders."

"Good heavens!" his father ejaculated, too stag-

gered for a time to word his horror and condemnation of the course which Gilbert proposed pursuing. There was a pause, during which Gilbert drew caricatures on the margin of the newspaper that was lying on the table before him. Caricatures of some of his friends in their first paroxysm of amazement at hearing the news of the decision to which he had come.

When Lord Rollamore spoke again, it was to say,—

“Mrs. Torrens will be deeply distressed and disappointed at—”

“Mrs. Torrens’s sentiments don’t concern me, happily.”

“She has absolute power over her daughter, remember.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, for her daughter’s sake. But again I repeat, that does not concern me.”

“It will concern you when you find that your choice of a profession will prejudice your chance of marrying her daughter.”

“Nothing would ever induce me to marry her daughter,” Gilbert said, boiling over with wrath, and yet quite alive to the absurdity of the situation at the same time. “My dear father! Surely this attenuated scheme isn’t at the bottom of your burdening yourself and my mother with Mrs. Torrens for a guest?”

“Mrs. Torrens has over four hundred thousand pounds at her *absolute* disposal, and only her daughter to leave it to. She is well inclined towards you. I have reason to know that.”

“Well inclined towards me! I wouldn’t marry her or her daughter to save my life,” Gilbert said, seriously. Then he laughed. “Mrs. Torrens for a mother-in-law! Mrs. Torrens, with her ‘little charities’ and her self-righteousness, and her curious freedom from every generous feeling, to say nothing of her mock piety, and

her unbounded artificiality ! No, thank you, my dear father, I won't enter those lists !”

“ In your charitable outburst against the mother, you forget the girl altogether. May Torrens is a nice girl, and a good girl.”

“ A nice, and, I really believe, a good girl,” Gilbert conceded heartily ; “ but a girl about whom I haven't the faintest desire to know more than I do at present.”

“ That being the case with regard to May Torrens, I trust it is the case with every other girl of your acquaintance ?” his father asked sharply, and Gilbert replied lazily,—

“ I can't give you that assurance. I am very much interested in a girl. Whether I shall ever get her to be interested in me remains to be proved. Until it is proved, I shall say no more about her. But I promise you that, as soon as I know myself, I'll introduce you to her, and you'll think I've done well in renouncing Miss Torrens.”

“ You have not—not gone down to the ranks below you in search of a wife, have you ?” his father asked, with a choking gulp of disappointment and pain. “ Gilbert, if you have, I implore you to be candid with me ! Thrust the fancy out before it drags you down and fetters your feet, and makes your life a wretched lie. Marriage with a woman beneath him is a yoke on a man's neck that effectually prevents his ever holding his head up among his peers again. Have it as you would like, for the commission of such a folly leads a man into sin sooner or later. Gilbert, spare me this crowning sorrow. God knows, I have had enough to bear in my life.”

Gilbert listened to this impassioned tirade very calmly. It appeared to him to be a mere farrago of nonsense uttered in an unreasoning fury. “ It's not as if he had

suffered from the folly he denounces so strongly himself," the son argued, remembering that his father had married a woman whose family was as noble as his own, and that he had enjoyed twenty-eight years of quiet happiness with her. Accordingly, Lord Rollamore's jeremiad against the foolish iniquity of a man marrying beneath him made no sort of impression upon his son.

"I can assure you that if I ever marry, I shall marry the woman in whom I confess to you I am interested now—and it will not be a misalliance."

"Then you will be a pauper, a poverty-stricken, beggarly curate all the days of your life."

Gilbert did not like to remind his father that as at the latter's death he, Gilbert, would be the owner of all the Rollamore landed property, poverty was not the rock on which he need dread splitting. The reminder might, he thought, sound as if he were already calculating on the chances of such a contingency. So he contented himself with remarking that "riches had no great charm for him, excepting for the power they gave of doing good to so much of down-trodden humanity as the possessors of them could reach."

"If I haven't money to give, I can give my work and my life to the cause I think deserving of them," he said.

And at this his father ranted at him again, calling him "a fanatic," and other hard names that failed to convince Gilbert that a "worldly" must of necessity be a higher and nobler life.

"Does your newly-born religion teach you to throw over the responsibility of keeping your promise to remain here for the winter?" Lord Rollamore asked angrily, and his son told him, No, he intended to keep his promise, and remain at Parkventon for the winter,

and employ his time (usefully, he hoped) in acting as lay-reader to the over-worked vicar of Caddleton.

This was the one straw too much. Lord Rollamore had striven with himself, and moderated the rancor of his tongue up to this, though it had been horrible to him that his son was determined on throwing away abilities that would have ensured him a brilliant position at the Bar, in the lower walks of the Church. He had even put a bridle on his tongue when Gilbert had scoffed at and declined the marriage scheme for which he, Lord Rollamore, had lowered himself to plot and plan with Mrs. Torrens. But when it came to the pass of Gilbert's avowing that he meant to give his services as lay-reader to a parson and a parish just under his lordship's nose, there came a crisis.

"I'll have no cursed methodistical proceedings emanating from Parkventon, and no canting humbug introduced into the family life to mar the peace of it," he raved.

And when Gilbert quietly assured his father that his "views were the reverse of methodistical, and that it was to the Church he intended giving his services, not to any form of dissent," matters were not mended. Lord Rollamore declined to see any difference between a dissenting minister and "a fellow who wasn't a parson, and who went about preaching and calling himself a 'lay-reader.'"

"You'll disgrace me in the eyes of the county," he said savagely, and Gilbert controlled himself, and answered steadily, but without any exasperating coolness, that he "most fervently trusted this would be the only disgrace that either of his sons would ever bring upon him."

There was a great deal more said between the father and the son, which need not be recorded here. It is

enough to say that they separated, each strengthened in his opinion and determination, and that life for some time looked a very dismal and low thing to Lord Rollamore.

“That he should prefer pauperism, obscurity, and drudgery to a splendid position and boundless wealth, with a nice girl for his wife, is incomprehensible,” Lord Rollamore said to his wife, and she, being Gilbert’s mother, loving him, and knowing him well, said : —

“He has done right ; he has done the only thing he could do, feeling as he does. He has not made the choice lightly. I know that. Even if he had to face pauperism and obscurity, as you say, I should counsel him to hold to his choice ; but he will never know poverty, however it may be about the drudgery and professional obscurity. He will be a rich man when we pass away, Rollamore, and, while we live, he can never want money.”

“I tell you—” Lord Rollamore was beginning, then he checked himself, and, after a moment, he added, “It’s an awful thing when a man is baffled in all his efforts to benefit them by fools in his own family. Here’s another pretty thing, too, another nice little idiotic plot been hatched to thwart and destroy me. Gilbert has fallen in love with some girl he has picked up in some of his Quixotic wanderings into places in which he has no business, and refuses to try his chance with Miss Torrens. What do you say to that?”

“I am not surprised that he should decline to be married to Miss Torrens against his will. I told you I felt sure you were nourishing a delusion when you thought to forward that scheme by inviting the Torrens here.”

“But about the other part of it. Do *you* know anything of this girl?”

“Indeed I do not, Rollamore; but, believe me, Gilbert is incapable of falling in love with a low girl. She may not be a wealthy or titled girl, but, if he loves her, she’s a lady, and she is *good*.”

“Don’t split straws with me,” he growled angrily. “Probably she’s some Methodist preacher’s daughter, or she-missionary, who’s ready to help him in his good works; or else she’s a ballet-girl or barmaid, or both, perhaps, whom he has converted. Bah! I’m sick of his follies, and you—*you*, his mother, are ready to encourage him in them.”

“I am ready to encourage Gilbert in doing everything he thinks right, for what he thinks right will be right. And now we will say no more about it. It would be a bitter thing that we should quarrel about our son’s choice when he has made such a good one.”

“For mercy’s sake don’t rejoice over the downfall of every hope I had for the boy,” his father said miserably. “When I think of what will become of him if he lets the opportunity of getting the Torrens’s money slip, I feel completely broken and hopeless.”

“This is being morbid, dear,” she said, cheerfully; “you have always been over-anxious and over-sensitive about our dear Gilbert. I wish your heart could be at rest about him as mine is. He will be happy and contented in the profession he has chosen, irrespective of the rank and wealth that will be his when we are gone.”

She busied herself about some work she held in her hand, and did not observe the look of being tortured by fear and suspense which convulsed her husband’s face as she spoke. A moment after he roused himself, and resolutely checked the tide of thought which had been

flowing in such a miserable channel, by saying :—

“By the way, here’s a letter I want to show you from Mrs. Torrens ; she wants me to invite an artist fellow, a friend of her late husband’s, who is painting her portrait, to come down with them. What can we do about it?”

“She *asks* for an invitation?”

“See what she says—‘I shall esteem it a favor to myself if you will extend your hospitality to a friend of ours who is staying with us now. The fact is, I have asked him on a long visit ; he is painting my portrait, and I don’t know what to do with him while we are at Parkventon. I feel that I may take this liberty with you and Lady Rollamore, for my dear husband regarded Mr. White as a brother.’”

“Dreadful woman !” Lady Rollamore said shuddering. “I shall be very glad when she realizes that she may not take the liberty of making unreasonable requests to you and Lady Rollamore.”

“Meantime we must have this man, I suppose?”

“I suppose so ; who is he?”

“I don’t know,” Lord Rollamore said curtly.

He was seriously disturbed by the events which were happening in his immediate family circle, and it annoyed him that a useless stranger should be projected thus unceremoniously into their midst. At the same time, he knew that if he refused the invitation for which Mrs. Torrens had somewhat peremptorily craved, she would be offended, and small as his hopes were now of bringing about a union between Gilbert and Mrs. Torrens’s daughter, he clung to that forlorn hope, and shrank from giving her any cause, however slight, of offence yet.

“I should write and tell her that every room is occupied,” Lady Rollamore went on.

“We can’t do that—can’t possibly do that ; she’s capable of making inquiries when she comes here, and finding out some remote unoccupied hole, and confounding us altogether. He must come, I suppose, and so we had better let him come with a good grace. I think I remember to have seen his name in the Academy catalogue ; he must be a decent fellow, or he wouldn’t have been a friend of old Torrens’s.”

“I hope he is young, and in love with May Torrens, and she with him,” Lady Rollamore said. “If that’s the case, I’ll see all manner of good in him.”

So it was settled, and a letter was written inviting Mr. White to Parkventon that same day.

The house soon began to fill, and among the earlier arrivals was Mrs. Torrens, her daughter, and Mr. White. The latter was so happily engrossed with himself and his patroness, that he made himself entirely at home at once, and was quite oblivious of the perfectly polite, but delicately distinct, way in which Lady Rollamore stiffened her manner to him. The painter, who was a poet too, according to his own account, was not in the least sensitive, and, together with Mrs. Torrens, laughed at what he termed Lady Rollamore’s local prejudices.

“Probably she’s afraid that one of her daughters may fall in love with me, and, not knowing that my soul is in bondage to other fetters, she fears that I may respond,” he said to Mrs. Torrens, who laughed and tossed her head, and called her hostess “a ridiculous woman for thinking of such things.”

“My plan always has been, never to think that a man is in love till he tells the woman so plainly. It’s the plan I’ve gone on with myself, and the plan I shall go on with May.”

“Your plans are always perfect,” he murmured.

“Dear lady! shall we get on a little with the portrait now, or shall I read to you?”

“Read that last poem you wrote,” the lady ordered, and, as flesh is weak, especially bard’s flesh, the author complied with alacrity.

While he was reading, the other men were out shooting. The sport was good, for though Lord Rollamore’s cottages had gone to ruin during his long absence from Parkventon, his game had been well preserved. One of the keenest shots of the party was the family lawyer, Mr. Wyndham, whose father and grandfather had been the Rollamores’ family lawyers before him. Keen shot as he was, he was elderly and rheumatic, and so, when a howling easterly wind got up, he listened to words of wisdom from his host, and agreed to walk home with him.

They had much to talk about, for Wyndham was fully—very fully—in his host’s confidence. The lawyer listened to his friend’s account of Gilbert’s mad choice of a profession, and suspected *penchant* for some girl in an inferior position to himself—listened thoughtfully, and, when Lord Rollamore had finished speaking, replied,—

“I hoped, when I heard that Mrs. Torrens was here, that it was settled between Gilbert and her daughter. I am sorry—more than sorry—for the lad, Rollamore. Does Mrs. Torrens know that he is holding back?”

“She has not said anything. Her whole time is taken up with a fellow she has got in tow—an artist called White—”

He paused abruptly, for Mr. Wyndham had come to a dead stop. The lawyer’s face was blanched, and working painfully. He opened his mouth, but no sound came forth for a moment or two. Then he asked hoarsely,—

“You don’t mean a man who paints portraits badly, and writes poems, and gives himself the air of an æsthetic—long-haired, tall, and rather striking-looking?”

“The same, I should think,” Lord Rollamore said carelessly, and then Wyndham put his hand on his client’s arm, bent forward, and whispered a few words.

For a full minute Lord Rollamore stood still as if turned to stone. Then he gave a groan, staggered, and fell forward in a fainting fit.

They were near to one of the gardener’s cottages, luckily, and the gardener’s wife was an athletic person, who made light of picking up the larger portion of Lord Rollamore, and helping Mr. Wyndham to carry him into her cottage, where he was soon brought round by the means of a little brandy from the lawyer’s flask, and cold water on his head and hands. When he recovered, he looked dazed and shaken, as if he had suffered from a bad fall. They were silent for the greater part of their homeward walk, but when they neared the house, and saw Mrs. Torrens and the artist strolling to meet them, Lord Rollamore turned his white-drawn face slightly towards his companion, and muttered,—

“God forgive me! The man is odious to me, Wyndham.” Then they were joined by the man in question and his companion, and the lawyer had a good opportunity of observing Mr. White the artist in one of his most auspicious moments.

In fact, the poet-painter, as he loved to call himself, was very much elated, and this by a very mundane and extremely unpoetical circumstance. He had read his latest poem with such effect to Mrs. Torrens, that she had been betrayed into the mature folly of warmly admiring what she did not in the least understand in the composition. On the strength of this, he had re-

minded himself that though she was charged with qualities that were uncongenial to him—though her physique gave him the shudders, and her voice rasped his nerves, she was a woman with upwards of four hundred thousand pounds at her disposal, therefore a woman to be won! Accordingly he had laid siege to her widowed heart with a fearlessness that was born of the knowledge that if he failed he would suffer neither in heart nor pocket, while if he succeeded he would be four hundred thousand pounds to the good!

He had succeeded!

CHAPTER IX.

"UPON MY WORD, MAY!"

ALL this time, Mrs. Maunders had been going on her way—and that way had seemed as uneventful as ever—as quietly as she had gone for the last twenty-five years. Doctor Sheffield came and went continually without either advancing or receding from that place he had held with Florence all along; and Kathleen took his visits to herself complacently and confidingly and was happy.

The Christmas holidays had commenced, and were wearing away, and, at their expiration, Florence was to go to that school in Exeter to which she was to give her services in imparting all sorts of knowledge in return for board, lodging, and thirty pounds a year. It was not a dazzling prospect, but the girl was satisfied with it. Prospects that had opened before her eyes had never been of the dazzling order. She was satisfied, for, by so many pounds a year she would be better off than she had been with Mrs. Hunter, and those few extra

pounds would give her nicer boots and gloves, and enable her to offer prettier birthday presents to her mother and Kathleen.

That brief interlude, during which one of the "young Kilburns" had been sick and a sojourner in their house, was almost forgotten. Even local gossip had ceased to speculate as to whether "the poor young man" had, out of idleness and gratitude, permitted himself to be "smitten" with one of Mrs. Maunders's pretty daughters. The fact that the Honorable Fergus had never so much as cast eyes on one of the pretty daughters was not generally known. However, Mrs. Maunders had her house to herself again, and the Honorable Fergus was heart-whole.

But Fergus' elder brother Gilbert had a good deal on his mind that stood between himself and his rest. He had never been able to forget the bright beauty and pleasant self-possession of the girl to whom Doctor Sheffield had introduced him with such a happy air of proprietorship on the Wreymouth Road. She pleased him more than he had ever been pleased before by a girl out of a book. He wanted to know more of her, and he didn't know how to set about achieving his object without putting either her or himself in a false position. He had not fallen into an idiotic, headstrong passion for her, but he had been attracted and pleased by her more than he had ever been attracted and pleased by any girl whom he had hitherto met.

"If she is what she looks, I shall be awfully fond of her," he admitted to himself after seeing her once.

After a second meeting, he admitted nothing, even to himself. Had he done so, the admission would probably have run thus, "*I am* awfully fond of her, whatever she is."

Mrs. Maunders was driving rather a brisk trade about

this time. Parkventon was full, and the visitors at Parkventon had to be supplied with all the daily and weekly literature, and with as many new novels as Mrs. Maunders could put down for their consumption. Once a day, at least, a smart dog-cart, or comfortable wagonette, or well-appointed close carriage would be seen stopping at Maunders's while some envoy from Parkventon would be giving orders for, or fetching what had just arrived, in the way of light literature.

Fergus made himself very useful at this juncture. He could not join the shooting parties on account of his ankle still being weak, but he could drive down for the London daily papers, which came by train, and he was always ready to do so. As May Torrens liked "meeting the papers, and getting the first peep at them," she said, she frequently went with him. So Fergus was usefully employed, and consequently happy.

Once or twice May's mother remonstrated with her on the imprudence of her conduct.

"When is that sailor going to join his ship?" she would ask. "Far better you would spend your time in going about the hamlets and seeing the poor with Mr. Kilburn, May."

"Somehow or other, Mr. Kilburn makes me feel that he doesn't want me," May said, happily candid in her indifference to Gilbert.

"Mr. White thinks that Fergus is hoping to get hold of your—my money."

"Mr. White's thoughts are always worded in an un-gainly and revolting way when he speaks on the spur of self-interest," the girl answered angrily. "He sees that Mr. Fergus Kilburn likes me, therefore he wants to make you dislike Mr. Fergus Kilburn, and he'll succeed, of course he will."

“ May, it is high time that you learnt to exercise more control over your caprices.”

“ Mamma, that phrase has been put into your mouth by that odious man.”

“ I insist upon it that you speak more respectfully of Mr. White. His talents ought to command civil attention from you, let alone the fact that he was a great friend and favorite of your dear papa’s, and that he is one of my dearest—my very dearest friends.”

“ Mamma ! ”

The surprise and horror the girl managed to impart into her tone in that one word made Mrs. Torrens uncomfortable.

“ Pray don’t scream at me in that way. May, if you listen quietly, I have something to tell you—something you will be very pleased to hear if you have a proper affection for me, and are not wholly selfish. Mr. White is younger than I am, but he has an old head on his shoulders, and he values people for what they *are*, for their sterling qualities, and not for their looks and youth only. He and I agree on most points, and—and, well, May, the truth is, he has done me the honor of asking me to marry him, and I have promised to do so.”

May stared at her mother in undisguised dismay, tinged with disquiet. That Mr. White should have been her mother’s chosen and familiar friend had been bad enough, but that he should be put in the place of her dead father—put in authority over herself—was crushing. Moreover, she was stung additionally by the thought of what the verdict of the world would surely be.

“ They’ll say mamma is the Queen of Fools, and he’s the Prince of Knaves,” she thought, but for a time she said nothing, she only looked at her mother.

By-and-bye Mrs. Torrens asked, pettishly,—

“Aren’t you going to speak, child? It’s not very kind or considerate of you to be struck in this way when I confide my hopes and intentions in you. Some mothers wouldn’t have thought it necessary to tell a daughter at once of so tender and delicate a matter.”

“Oh, mamma, don’t ; don’t do this,” May burst out, startling herself even by the vehemence with which she spoke. “Neither he nor you can be thinking of doing it for love—that’s quite out of the question.”

Here Mrs. Torrens managed to gasp out,—

“Upon my word, May !” but May went on without heeding the interruption.

“And, as for *respect*, how can you feel it for such a man—a poor, false creature, who is nothing but a pretender, who gets other people to paint his pictures and write his poems? Oh, mamma, you’ll be wretched, wretched, with such a sham as that !”

“Stop !” Mrs. Torrens burst forth. She had been working herself up into a greater fury as each one of May’s heart-felt and eloquent sentences fell upon her ears. Somewhere, away in the recesses of her foolish heart, the widow was conscious that what she intended doing was a very weak thing indeed. At the same time, she had a very strong aversion to being told that any one else entertained the same opinion. So now she raved out “Stop !” to her recklessly frank daughter, determining to make the girl suffer for having made her (the widow’s) vanity smart. “Stop, May, before you are mad enough to utter words that I never can forget, and perhaps never can forgive. It is time indeed that I secured to myself the love and consideration I shall receive from Mr. White, when my daughter stabs me with words that are sharper than a serpent’s tooth. I warn you, May, I can be very firm when a principle is at stake, and I shall be very firm now. If you can-

not bring yourself to treat Mr. White with the respect his relationship towards you will soon command, I shall be obliged to make some arrangement for you that will leave the peace of my home undisturbed."

"You'll turn me out for that cuckoo, mamma? You don't mean that?"

"You put things in a very hard and painful way, May, and no doubt if you do find it impossible to live in the same house with Mr. White, you will tell people I have turned you out. Why, oh, why have children so little regard for their parents' feelings in these days? Have I ever denied *you* anything? Have I not indulged you in every way? And now, because it is my wish to ensure the constant companionship of one who will be a support and stay to us both—"

At this juncture the support and stay lounged into the room in the purple velvet coat which he wore during those hours which he was supposed to devote to painting. As he entered, May made her escape, and, running downstairs in a whirlwind of indignation and excitement, encountered Fergus in the hall.

"I'm just going to drive into Caddleton to change some books, Miss Torrens. Will you come?"

"I will," she assented; and as soon as they were seated in the dog cart, she burst forth with the story of her mother's weakness and her own wrongs.

He began by offering her comfort; before they returned to Parkventon, he was offering her love.

The news of the wealthy widow's engagement had spread through all the household before the shooting-party came home, and Mr. White fancied himself the hero of the party, for that day at least. He had always held a high opinion of himself and his claims to fortune, and now indeed it seemed as if the fickle goddess had smiled upon him, and chosen him for her darling child.

He would be wealthy beyond his wildest dreams. Of the woman who was confidingly about to endow him with that wealth, he scarcely thought at all.

Nevertheless, he kept up a pretty little game of pretended attention and devotion to her, rendering her rather exaggerated homage in public, and inventing all sorts of little fancy historiettes of his birth and ancestry. The real facts of the case concerning him, as far as he knew them himself, were these. Of his father, nothing was known, and his mother had died while he was too young to have any recollection of her. From a firm of London lawyers, who declared themselves ignorant of his parentage, and were pledged to secrecy as to the source of the supply, he received an income of five hundred a year.

“That is all I know about myself,” he said to Mrs. Torrens, and she, relieved to find that he had no poor relations, told him it “was enough.”

CHAPTER X.

GOOD INTENTIONS FRUSTRATED.

THOUGH Lord Rollamore had looked very ghastly when he first caught sight of Mr. White after Mr. Wyndham's whispered communication, and though he had said to his lawyer, “God forgive me—the man is odious to me,” he had shown no open hostility or disgust to the artist. On the contrary, when the latter gentleman had proclaimed his good luck with the widow, Lord Rollamore was almost the first to wish the oddly-assorted pair “well in their wooing.” But for all this self-control which he displayed, he was a

badly-shaken and an utterly unnerved man. It was true that rumor, which soon reached the servants' hall, said that Lady Rollamore had an evil time of it with him that day.

"Why should you grieve so terribly? Why should you say that this marriage spells ruin to your hopes, Rollamore?" she asked piteously for the twentieth time.

"Don't torture me with questions, you'll know soon enough," he answered irascibly. Then he went on to tell her that a reasonable woman, to say nothing of an affectionate mother, would have fathomed the cause of his disquietude. "You know I wanted that idiotic old woman's money for Gilbert. Now it will all flow into the coffers of a man who will have everything man wants without it."

"My dear," she protested, "I have understood that Mr. White is without much private means, and that he is not very liberally repaid for his poems and pictures, whereas our Gilbert will have the title, and abundant means to keep it up."

"Will he?—ah!" Lord Rollamore groaned.

"Besides, Gilbert might not have had the money even if he had fallen in love with the daughter."

"Then he should have secured the mother."

"Rollamore!" Words would have failed to express Lady Rollamore at this suggestion. So, after uttering his name with an accent of withering reproach, she went away, leaving her husband to repent him at leisure of having slighted Gilbert's claims to the blue ribbon of the matrimonial turf.

Lord Rollamore was not alone very long. He was soon joined by Mr. Wyndham, and no other was suffered to be present at their interview save misery, whom they were powerless to exclude.

There was more startling news of a family nature to

be imparted to Lord Rollamore before nightfall. Fergus, about whom he had never entertained either fears or doubts, came in quite cheerfully and asked to "have a yarn" with his father. To do him justice, he did not spin a needlessly long one, but came to the point at once, like the frank sailor he was.

"It's no use cringing round the subject, so I'll tell you at once that I've asked May Torrens to marry me, and she has said yes, provided you consent. We've neither of us much fear about that, for I suppose you'd just as soon she should marry me as marry Gilbert, and we know you tried to give that match a fair wind."

Lord Rollamore hid his face in his hands, and, in answer to Fergus's alarmed inquiry, he merely moaned.

At length, just as the patience even of the affectionate son was getting exhausted, the father lifted his head and spoke.

"Leave me now, Fergus ; don't speak of this matter to any one—not even to your mother, till to-morrow. I have had an appalling blow to-day, my boy, a blow that has fallen upon me as a just punishment for a folly of my youth. But it is not the less heavy because it is deserved, Fergus. Spare me more to-night, my boy. To-morrow I may be able to explain myself to you—and Gilbert."

Fergus, touched and frightened by the novel atmosphere of mystery and misery in which his father was enveloping himself, went away sobered unto sadness in the very first flush of his engagement, and, as he could not see May before the morning, he passed a sleepless night, conjecturing what "to-morrow" would bring forth.

It brought forth woe unutterable to the wife and children who loved Lord Rollamore, for, with the dawn of day, it was discovered that Lord Rollamore,

though still living, was as unconscious of all things as the bed on which he was lying.

“A paralytic stroke from which he will never recover consciousness,” the doctor said.

Poor Fergus, in the midst of his natural grief, found himself wondering if the secret he and Gilbert were to have heard would now be buried with their father, or if it would come to light and smite them.

Mrs. Torrens received the news of her daughter's engagement with great equanimity. As was, of course, only natural, all the guests took their departure from the sorely-smitten house at once. But, before she left, Mrs. Torrens conveyed her desire to Fergus that he should claim his bride without delay “under any circumstances.”

“Poor dear Lord Rollamore's state will compel us to have a *very* quiet wedding for May, but I am sure she will not object. With Mr. White's consent, I am prepared to allow her three hundred a-year for her separate use. You, as Lord Rollamore's second son, will have your mother's fortune, I presume?”

“The younger children, girls and boys, are to share that equally.”

“Oh! you'll be quite comfortably off with that and your pay,” Mrs. Torrens said condescendingly. “My altered prospects oblige me to do less for my dear child than I should have done if I had not taken upon myself the noble duty of furthering Mr. White's career with my fortune. As it is—”

“As it is, I don't want your three hundred a-year; I'll take May without a penny,” Fergus interrupted disdainfully; and Mrs. Torrens resolved to take him at his word.

The old lady and her young lover left immediately

after this, and the unfortunate daughter was dragged away with them.

“I will soon fetch you, my darling,” Fergus whispered, as he bid her good-bye ; and the gleam of happiness which came into the girl’s pretty face made Mr. White spiteful.

“It’s a pity you could not bring yourself to favor the elder instead of the younger son, May. Had you done so, your mother and I would have made a suitable allowance to your rank, for you would soon have been Lady Rollamore. I hear the old man can’t last long.”

“It’s a sin and a shame of May to have let the title slip,” Mrs. Torrens added indignantly. “She knows I had set my heart on having a title in the family.”

“You can buy one in France for Mr. White,” May said contemptuously ; by which little bit of ill-tempered sarcasm, though she scored one against him for the moment, she made an enemy of Mr. White for life.

When the house was cleared of the guests, when even Mr. Wyndham, who found himself helpless and useless as things were, was gone, Parkventon almost resumed its air of normal quiet. All gayety, all visiting, all stir and bustle and merry excitement ceased. The only relaxation the girls gave themselves was an occasional walk or drive into Caddleton ; while, as for the boys, Gilbert devoted himself to the well-being of the people on his father’s property, and even, indeed, to the entire management of the property itself, and Fergus rejoined his ship.

They were none of them greatly exercised when they read florid accounts of the tremendous preparations which Mrs. Torrens was making to duly celebrate her marriage with White the artist. Sometimes they laughed

over the accounts of her almost regal *trousseau*, which were published in advance. Sometimes they felt disgusted that this mother, who could lavish so much on herself, should let her daughter marry Fergus without giving her a penny. But, as a rule, they took no interest in either White or his antique bride.

While things were in this state, Florence Maunders was being subjected to attentions and manifestations of feeling from Doctor Sheffield that would have been very flattering and delightful to her had she loved or even very much liked him. As it was, they annoyed, disturbed, and displeased her, especially as Kathleen was beginning to discover that she was not the magnet that drew him so constantly to their house.

With the unreasonableness of a girl very much in love, Kathleen began to accuse her sister of being inclined to unduly attract and fascinate the man whom she saw was holding aloof from herself (Kathleen). Jealousy made her unjust and injudicious, and, if the truth must be told, a trifle malicious.

The malice developed itself on the day when it was finally settled that Florence should after all remain and help her mother at home for awhile, instead of Exeter. Mrs. Maunders had come to this conclusion, apparently without any reason, on the day the report reached her of Lord Rollamore's being stricken down beyond all hope of recovery. Curiously, too, from this time Mrs. Maunders's own health seemed to fail. It was more than ever necessary, that one of the girls should relieve the mother of either the labors of housekeeping or of the shop. Kathleen seemed incapable of hoisting any additional burden on to her own shoulders, by reason of the weakness engendered by her infatuation for Sheffield. So it was decided that Florence should stay to be her mother's right hand.

That same day Gilbert Kilburn met and talked to her for a happy half-hour. At the end of it he had promised himself that this girl, and this girl only, should be his wife, and had given her to know in the occult way lovers have, that though he asked none from her, he had made this solemn promise to both of them.

It was not extraordinary, therefore, that Florence's mood should have been one of intense happiness that evening. Nor was it extraordinary either, that Kathleen should attribute this happiness to the wrong source—the presence, namely, of Dr. Sheffield.

“No wonder Flo' looks so wonderfully well satisfied with herself,” the elder sister remarked to her mother and Doctor Sheffield, during one of Florence's brief absences from the room on duty. “She had the Honorable Gilbert Kilburn dancing attendance on her this morning for an hour. I wonder she can come down to our level to-night; don't you, Doctor Sheffield?”

He felt infuriated with Florence for having by her conduct given rise to such a speech, and with Kathleen for having made it. In his fury, he was cruel to both sisters and their mother.

“Mr. Kilburn is a friend of mine,” he said stiffly. “Still, good fellow as he is, he has enough of his father in him to render him an injudicious companion for Florence. You understand me, Mrs. Maunders? As to her deigning to come down to our level, Kathleen, I am satisfied that she is happier with me than with him. And if I am satisfied, you need not be jealous for me.”

“Jealous—for—you!”

She repeated the words after him disjointedly. Then as their full meaning burst upon her poor misguided little heart, she nerved herself to bear unflinchingly the sharpest pain a woman's heart can feel. Do any of you know it, who read this? The pain of seeing the

man you love prefer your sister, who rather dislikes him, to yourself.

“I should be jealous for you indeed if Flo, could think of him before you,” she said, without any appearance of effort. “As it is, as you say, all the Gilbert Kilburns in the world couldn’t be dangerous to her.”

She had made her effort bravely. Doctor Sheffield respected her as he had never done, when, having said her say, she, struggling to smile and seem unconcerned, got herself out of the room on some trifling pretext.

When the door had closed behind Kathleen, Mrs. Maunders gave a long look—half of appeal, half of inquiry—at the irreproachable disturber of their domestic peace.

“If it is, as Kathleen foolishly hinted, about her sister and Mr. Kilburn, I can do nothing, Doctor Sheffield. I can’t interfere with Florence in this matter. Mr. Kilburn is a better man than his—is a good man.”

“You were going to say he is a better man than his father. You are right.”

“Then I will not—and you shall not come between him and my child.” She tried to speak firmly, but her voice broke on the last word.

“I have a document in my possession which proves that *you* are aware of a wrong which has been done to Mr. Kilburn by his father.”

“A wrong!—a document!”

She grew frightened, and stood up in her alarm, confronting him—not crouching away from him as a cowardly or guilty woman would have done.

“The Honorable Gilbert Kilburn will never be Lord Rollamore, and you know it, Mrs. Maunders. I have it under your own hand in a letter written to your hus-

band at the time of Lord Rollamore's marriage—of his *second* marriage—that you know it.”

“Gilbert Kilburn is Lord Rollamore's eldest *living* son,” she gasped out; “the other—the other died.”

“The other one lived—is living now, and Lord Rollamore knows it.”

Doctor Sheffield put in calmly,—

“Don't agitate yourself, Mrs. Maunders. For Florence's sake, whatever your share in the business may be, I shall stand by you.”

“Stand by me—my share in the business,” she echoed aghast. “Oh, you know *nothing*—*nothing*, or you would never speak to me like that.”

Then Doctor Sheffield placed that little letter of hers to her husband, which he had found, before her. He kept a watchful eye upon it, prepared to intervene with a strong hand if she developed a destructive tendency towards it. To his chagrin, when she had read it, she only said,—

“That tells you very little of the old story, in which you rightly enough assume that I am interested. A little child was alive in those days, who must have died before Lord Rollamore let his son Gilbert appear before the world as his eldest son and heir.”

“You are ambitious for your daughter. You would like to see Florence Lady Rollamore,” he allowed himself to sneer.

“I hope the right man, whoever he is, will be Lord Rollamore, and I wish no better fate for my child than to see her the wife of such a man as Gilbert Kilburn.”

CHAPTER XI.

GILBERT SPEAKS TOO SOON.

OUT of this conversation with Doctor Sheffield, there grew a curious feeling of strength in M^{rs}. Maunders's hitherto slightly relaxed mind. "Relaxed," be it understood, on the point of Lord Rollamore and his antecedents only. She felt intuitively that Doctor Sheffield had been trying to frighten her into forwarding his views on her daughter Florence. With even stronger conviction, she felt now that he had not the power of punishing her, even should she refuse to be his ally. She had no feeling of anger against him for the attempt he had made to force her to range herself on his side. On the contrary, though she shuddered to think of what would have happened between Florence and herself had he really possessed the power he started by assuming, she rather liked him. "At any rate, he must value Florence highly," she argued; "he must really and truly love her, or he would not persevere, and plot, and plan, and even hint at the possibility of descending to the meanness of coercing her mother's interest on his behalf. Oh, yes, there were excuses—many—to be made for him." So Mrs. Maunders argued on his behalf with her own taste and judgment, accepting the excuses finally, which she made for him herself.

But there was another outcome of his visit to the Maunders's that evening, which Doctor Sheffield had neither desired nor foreseen. Kathleen spoke to her sister seriously on his behalf, and so ruined his case with the younger sister more completely, sooner and

more humiliatingly, than he would have ruined it himself, had Kathleen left him to his own devices.

It was all done by a few words ; a sentence or two from well-meaning Kathleen put the whole matter as hopelessly wrong, from her point of view, as if she had not been " well-meaning. "

" Just a few words, Flo', " she murmured, as she kissed her sister good-night ; " don't hurt and perhaps alienate *him* by seeming to listen to Mr. Kilburn's stupid nonsense. "

" Good-night, Kathleen darling, I'm so drowsy, but hear this and believe it : I'd listen to Mr. Kilburn all the days of my life if I might or could. "

" And Doctor Sheffield ? "

" Doesn't exist for me, dear, but will, I hope, for you, if you don't go on being anxious to give away what you most want to keep. "

Now, these words of Florence's, though they gave Kathleen a momentary sensation of relief, galled and annoyed her when she came to think over them in those dismal watches of the night, which the majority of us are compelled to keep at not unfrequent periods of our lives. Kathleen would almost rather have seen Florence ready to enter the lists against her for the prize of Doctor Sheffield's heart and hand than have heard her carelessly-indifferent disclaimer of any desire to possess them. The elder sister could not solace herself with the fancy that Florence had spoken in pique. What she had said she had meant thoroughly, and Kathleen's mortification was great as she realized this.

But, in the morning, matters looked brighter. Naturally, as poor Flo' was so foolishly in love with a man above her in station, her judgment was out of order, and her power of appreciation of other men in an unreliable condition. After all, it was infinitely preferable

to have her sister crossly ignorant of the superiority of Doctor Sheffield's merits than to have her for a rival. Probably, too, she had been quite mistaken in thinking that he took any other interest in Flo' than a man would naturally take in the girl he hoped to have for a sister-in-law. On the whole, by the time Kathleen came down to breakfast, she was in a happy and hopeful frame of mind. Far happier, indeed, than Florence, for the latter was smarting under the knowledge that she must indeed have weakly betrayed her growing liking for Mr. Kilburn for Kathleen to have found it out.

"I'll never stop to speak to him again. I'll just bow and pass on if I meet him," she resolved.

There was something that struck her as ridiculous in the idea of her having, even for a minute, allowed herself to fancy that he liked her. She was a girl who had never permitted herself to dream of the splendidly improbable in love or matrimony. Her life had been a happy but intensely commonplace one, too full of monotonous daily work for feeble romance to have any disturbing influence in it. That other people should have fallen into the absurd error of supposing that because Mr. Kilburn had been rather civil to her, she should have incontinently thrown her heart at his feet was insulting. So, with the determination strong upon her of guarding herself from further insults of the kind, she was about to give Mr. Kilburn a grave, almost a stern, bow when next she met him, when he razed her structure of good intentions to the ground in a moment by pausing and saying abruptly : —

"My father is much worse to-day, Miss Maunders. We are a sorrow-stricken family just now. I want to feel that, in the heavier sorrow that is coming upon us, I shall have your special sympathy."

“Indeed—indeed you will.”

“Thank you,” he said, gratefully ; “I was sure of it, Florence, but I wanted to hear you say it—I was on my way now to *your* mother’s house. I may not be able to see you again for a short time ; I must be with my mother constantly. But I shall know that you understand the cause of my absence, and that you are giving me the sympathy which only his future wife can give a man.

“Mr. Kilburn, I don’t know how to tell you—what to say,” she pulled up in her speech suddenly, for Doctor Sheffield came riding leisurely towards them.

“Say, yes—you are my future wife, and tell your mother, darling, but no one else. I had not meant to say so much while my father’s terrible illness is casting such clouds over us all. But I’m glad now that I have said it—even my mother will forgive what may seem like selfishness when she knows you and knows how happy you have made me.”

“I’m too happy to speak,” Florence murmured, and then she had to tone down her brilliant bliss, and make some sort of conventional response to Doctor Sheffield’s greeting.

“I could scarcely believe it could be you,” he said coldly, addressing Gilbert ; “Lord Rollamore has taken a turn for the worse since you left Parkventon. I am going to wire to town for two of the best men in such cases that we have, but I’m afraid there’s no hope.”

“Oh ! go—go at once !” Florence cried to her lover, and something in the unrestrained familiarity of her manner jarred on the doctor’s jealous mind, and goaded him into saying, as Gilbert rode off :—

“I am glad that you had the tact to send him off to the post he should never have deserted, Florence. I wish your good taste had intervened to prevent his

offering the spectacle to the casual rural observer of himself, as a dismounted cavalier, philandering with a young lady who is unknown to his family, while his father is on his death-bed."

"Don't say such cruel things, Doctor Sheffield," she flamed out spiritedly; "'philandering' is a word you will feel sorry you have used to me when you know—" she checked herself, remembering that Gilbert had said she was not to tell any one besides her mother, yet.

"When I know that you have entrapped the future Lord Rollamore, I suppose you would say? Ah! Florence, you have preferred him to me, but he will break his imaginary bonds to you when his father dies, take my word for it. Hear me even now. I have proved my fidelity, give me the right to protect you from the sneers that will be levelled at you when your fine titled lover deserts you."

"I will never tell any one what a coward you have been," she said coldly.

Then she turned and walked steadily home, leaving the mission which she had been on her way to fulfil at Wreymouth unfulfilled. As for Doctor Sheffield, the only grain of comfort he got out of his rather dramatic interview with her was found in her scornful promise "not to tell any one what a coward he had been."

Meantime, Gilbert reached home to find his father even worse than he had feared. Still the poor, unconscious old man lingered on, day after day, still the same agonizing monotony of hopelessness prevailed, and still that terrible secret which had prostrated Lord Rollamore remained unrevealed.

When Florence first communicated the great news of the gloriously happy future that had that day opened out before her to her mother, the latter seemed almost stunned.

“Aren’t you glad, mother? Aren’t you happy and proud for me?” the girl asked, in her impatient greed for sympathy in this hour of the crowning glory of her girlhood.

“He is a good man, and oh, my child, that’s everything when a girl has given her heart to him; but I’m frightened, Flo, I’m frightened.”

“What nonsense! What at, mother? Do you think that I shall make but a poor Lady Rollamore! Don’t be afraid. I can soar to *any* height and take my place easily if Gilbert approves of me.”

Then Mrs. Maunders struggled to shake off the dazed feeling that was overpowering her, and poured forth a rather incoherent torrent of congratulatory and affectionate words.

“How surprised and proud Kathleen will be,” she said presently.

“Kathleen mustn’t know it yet. Gilbert expressly said no one but you must know about it yet, on account of his father’s illness.”

“Oh, these secrets, these secrets,” Mrs. Maunders muttered miserably to herself.

Then she tried to reassure herself by remembering that the son was a better man than the father had been, and that Florence had more stamina and self-respect than had been the portion of a girl who had once suffered a good deal through that father. Nevertheless, though she had emerged from her slough of despond, and said all the fond things a loving mother does say when her daughter is just happily engaged, Florence felt that there was something wanting, and so was not quite as exuberantly blissful on this, the first day of her engagement, as she would otherwise have been. However, she was quite as happy as the average mortal may expect to be. Will she sink in your estimation

when it is told that she found much felicity in writing the words "Florence Rollamore" several times that day?

CHAPTER XII.

AN ARTIST'S CHOICE.

MRS. TORRENS was enjoying her aftermath to the uttermost limit of her capacity for enjoyment. She had plenty of obsequious friends about her enormous wealth. A young man whom she adored, who, "for considerations," posed as her lover, and an inexhaustible stock of the rudest health. Nerves she had none. Sensitiveness she had none. Her supply of delicacy of feeling must have run out in her infancy. Her selfishness was of that coarse calibre, that it rendered her impervious to the suffering of every other created thing, save herself and Mr. White. *Who* can say that at this juncture she was not a perfectly happy woman, with health and wealth, and White, and fawning friends, each and all absolutely at her command?

Lovers of justice, and all such as like to see the law of compensation in good working order, will be gratified to learn that this woman had, at least, a couple of crumples in her rose-leaf. The roughest of the two was the fact that absolute contentment, combined with high living, had made her so unmanageably fat, that, in her richest attire, she had the appearance of a feather-bed which had been thrust into silken and satin coverings for some occult reason. The second drawback to her felicity was that her artist-betrothed had developed a commendable love of art recently, and would work incessantly at his studio in the Avenue Road. When she

pressed the claims of the beautifully-appointed room which she had ordered to be arranged as his studio in her own house upon him, he would look at her tenderly, and enlarge upon the superiority of the light in the Avenue Road, and upon his burning desire to make a name which should "glorify her, his goddess." Now, this was pretty, and ought to have been soothing to a middle-aged, fat woman, but, somehow or other, Mrs. Torrens was not soothed. She loved and trusted her White, but she liked to love and trust him well under her own eyes. She offered him herself, her plainest house-maids, her coachman, and her pug as models, if he must paint "from the life," and he refused all these good gifts at her hand with a sweet earnestness and decision that strained her love and trust.

She could not confide the tale of her disappointment and pained chagrin at this contumacy of his to any one, for fear of creating more mirth than sympathy. So she nursed it in the secrecy of her own heart until it assumed unbearable proportions.

Her ideas of artists' models were vague, but alarming. Some of them were old, ugly, and picturesque, he had told her. But others, he had once unwarily let fall, were well-formed, well-looking young women. Perhaps it was the charms of one of these latter snares that he was portraying in that good light which he had offered her as an excuse for his continual and prolonged absences in the Avenue Road ! The desire "to know the worst" claimed her for its own, and made a slave of her. Without saying a word to May, who would have quitted her stronghold of armed neutrality and non-intervention for once had she known of her mother's intention, the poor rich lady set off to put the falsehood or faith of her knight to the test.

She had no difficulty in finding his studio, for though

he had on one pretence or another contrived to evade giving her its number or precise locality, she had helped herself to it without his aid by means of rifling his pockets and mastering their carelessly-guarded contents. For desperate, uncompromising meanness, and contemptible curiosity which will stoop to any depth to gratify itself, there are but few human beings, happily, who can successfully combat with a voraciously vain, bloatedly wealthy, ignorant, underbred, elderly woman who wishes to obtain complete mastery over those whose lot is cast within her borders. She will stick at nothing. The fear and shame of being "found out" does not deter her. For if some one of her many, much-trodden upon worms turns, and leaves her, a score more are ready to crawl in and fill the vacant place, and strive to wriggle themselves into her favor and her will.

A smart page opened the door to her, and, with a grin of unbounded amusement and delight on his face, conducted her at once to the studio. Pushing back a heavy *portière*, and opening the door simultaneously with the words, "A lady to see you, sir," the astonished woman found herself in that apartment sacred to pure art, in which the man for whom she was about to pay four hundred thousand pounds, and cheat her child, painted from the life.

At first she saw nothing but a group near the vacant dais, composed of Mr. White, in his purple velvet coat (Mrs. Torrens had given it to him), lounging on some cushions at the feet of a beautiful, bold-faced girl, who in turn was lounging in the luxurious depths of a softly-cushioned chair. The girl, who had been sitting for "Elaine" a few minutes before, had a little exquisitely textured, semi-transparent material thrown round her perfectly modelled bust and arms, while a showy mass

of silken drapery fell from her waist to her feet. They were both smoking cigarettes, they were both roaring with laughter, and, to do them justice, they were both perfectly at their ease when Mrs. Torrens rolled in upon them.

Airily replacing her cigarette between her lips, the beautiful model, who was better really than the present appearances betokened, continued immovable in her chair, while Mrs. Torrens poured forth a stream of ungrammatical invective and reproach, and Mr. White, who had gracefully risen to his feet, posed effectively in silence. When Mrs. Torrens had exhausted herself, and sat down to cry, the artful æsthete whispered a few words to the girl, which had the effect of making her spring up, retire behind the screen, and presently emerge perfectly and modestly arrayed in her gray dress, mantle, and hat.

“Thank you very much for your introductions to those other artists, sir,” she said, very prettily. “Your having let me sit for ‘Elaine’ in your great picture has done me more service than I can ever properly thank you for.” Then she departed, dropping a dainty, deprecating little curtsy as she passed the outraged Mrs. Torrens, and left the wily White to make his peace with his widow.

The magic words which had wrought the wonderful transformation in Miss Valerie Heath’s demeanor were simply, “Go quietly and cleverly, there’s a dear girl. This is the aunt who’s so enormously rich, and whose heir I am. *You* understand?”

Miss Valerie Heath understood—and went.

“And *now*, if you please, tell me what this all means? I came here to give you a pleasant surprise.”

“You have given me a very pleasant one,” White murmured gently, almost “fondly” she thought.

“And I find you—*you*, almost a married man, wallowing, yes, *wallowing* at the impudent feet of an audacious girl, who sat there glorying in her smoke and her nakedness. Tell me what it means, Mr. White, or I shall be off with the marriage and leave you to starve on your beggarly few hundreds a year, for never another farthing of mine shall you see unless you tell me what it means !”

Again her breathlessness stopped her, and gave him his opportunity.

“It means, dear lady, that I am an artist.”

“An ‘artist,’ an ‘umbug.’”

“One of those intense souls who must live for the moment in the scene he is striving to depict. That girl you saw just now has the beauty—exactly the beauty that is wanted for my Elaine, but she has no soul. I have to inspire her, or she would fall short of my beautiful ideal, and rob me of the glory which I only desire in order that I may lay it at your feet.”

“Oh, gammon !” Mrs. Torrens interrupted, tossing her head, but she was partially pacified, and he saw it. Before he could pursue his advantage, his liege lady had a brief relapse, however. “That’s the way you ‘inspire’ your models, is it, with cigarettes and champagne” (glancing at *some* tell-tale goblets, and an empty bottle of the best brand), “and wallowings at their feet? I’m not easily deceived, Mr. White, as you will find if you don’t make an end of this nonsense. No more studios in St. John’s Wood for you if you want me and my money. A prince of painters might be satisfied with the one you have in my house. There, I suppose I must let you” (he was trying to kiss her fat hot hand) ; “I’m only a weak woman.”

“But my guiding star, my goddess,” he muttered fervently, for the thought of the four hundred thousand

pounds that was at stake sustained him in his efforts. At last he got her out of the studio and away without her making the discovery that the only results of his long hours of labor in the studio, with the exception of the study for Elaine, were caricatures of herself.

She took him home with her in triumph that day, and revolted poor May's taste more cruelly by playing off little endearments upon him that made the poor girl's cheeks burn with shame at being compelled to witness them. The sight of her mother's fashionably-arranged dyed head reposing languishingly on the shoulder of a man who was young enough to be her son was sending May out of the room in an uncontrollable passion, when a call from Mrs. Torrens arrested her in her flight.

"Come here, May," she drawled out affectedly. "Come and look at this little sketch which my Francis has made of me."

May went back unwillingly, avoiding meeting White's deprecating, admiring, furtive glances, but as soon as she saw the sketch, she flashed a look of unmistakable scorn and defiance at him.

"He is laughing at you, mamma. *Mother*, how can you be so blind? This is the picture of a beautiful woman, still young.

Mrs. Torrens flushed angrily, but controlled herself sufficiently to simper out, with a look that was partly searching, partly merely leering, at White,—

"My Francis draws me as he sees me."

"Then his sight plays him false, mamma," May said coldly, and White had the grace to feel sufficiently ashamed of himself to wriggle his supporting shoulder away from the fashionably-dyed head.

Two or three days after, Valerie Heath, the model,

while waiting in the studio of one of her patrons, who was not quite ready for her, picked up a *Morning Post*, and began to while away the time by reading the little paragraphs wherein the most unimportant movements of the great are set forth for the edification and learning of the public, to whom they are but names.

She was sitting for the figure of a sister of the Red Cross in a great military picture, and was looking uncommonly calm and nobly self-sustained, as well as singularly handsome, when her eyes lighted on the following paragraph, and forthwith her calm fled, and an expression that permeated her whole face and form—an expression of indignant dismay—reigned in its stead.

“We understand,” the paragraph ran, “that Mr. Francis White, the distinguished and popular painter and poet, will shortly lead to the hymeneal altar the relict of the late Thomas Torrens, Esq., a lady no less celebrated for her boundless wealth than for boundless hospitality. The event is creating a great stir in artistic and fashionable circles.”

“Is it?” the girl muttered, as she moistened her dry lips from a little flask of rose-water and flung down the paper. “What did he mean by his promises to me that I ‘should share his aunt’s wealth’ if he was going to take another wife? Did he think—” a fiery blush covered her face as she resolutely checked the thought even that was so humiliating to her own pride and honor. But though she posed as well as ever, she was not a good model that day. Her expression and complexion varied so constantly that her patron lost patience with her, and dismissed her before her time was up, in a displeased way, that boded ill for her chances of being employed by him again. A suddenly aroused fear that her weak indulgence in natural feeling might injure her professionally, acted as a tonic, and made

her gather her energies together again, for indulgence in natural feeling is not a profitable luxury in the case of a girl model, who not only desires to live honestly, but to maintain and educate a little brother who had no one to take care of him but herself.

She remembered this hard truth when she saw Mr. White the next time, so she bit back the scorching words that were rising to her lips when he said,—

"I see you have heard I am to be married to that old woman? But, Valerie, you know—"

"I know no more about you now, sir, and I never want to know any more, than I did when I believed you when you told me I should share the wealth you expected to have soon."

"You shall still do that, Valerie—" he was beginning eagerly, when she stopped him with a curious laugh.

"Because I am only a model, you think I know nothing of the laws of the land, Mr. White. But I know this—a man can't have two wives at the same time, and you've chosen the relict of the late Thomas Torrens to be yours!"

CHAPTER XIII.

"A GIRL NEVER CAN BE QUITE SURE."

THE "great trouble" at Parkventon was not kept in sole possession of the family for long. While the man who was already dead to this world for all practical purposes still breathed, a bomb-shell was let fall in their midst, which shattered them throughout their whole system.

Lady Rollamore's trustee under the will of her late father, a man who had been that father's trusted friend,

turned out a fraudulent defaulter, and, after leaving an abject confession to the effect that he had risked and lost the whole of Lady Rollamore's fortune, blew his brains out by way of making her and her children amends.

"Never mind, mother!" Gilbert was the first to recover speech after the shock had fallen upon them. "I shall have enough for us all. We sha'n't be the 'rich Kilburns' any longer, but we'll hang together and rub through all right—never fear."

"It's easy for Gilbert to say that; he'll have the title and all poor papa's property, but we shall be paupers," one sister sobbed into the sympathetic ear of the other. Their cups of misery were filled to overflowing, poor things! The father whom they had loved dearly was already dead to them, and the lavish means which had been theirs, and which would have procured them much practical amelioration of their woe, was suddenly wrenched from them. No wonder that their brother's magnanimous words sounded poor and tame in their ears. It was "easy enough for Gilbert"—for Gilbert, who would soon be Lord Rollamore, with two or three splendid estates and a large rent-roll—but for them! "We shall even have to ask him for our *trousseaux*, if we are ever lucky enough to marry," they murmured disconsolately. As for Lady Rollamore, the words "poverty" and "want of an adequate income" conveyed no meaning whatever to her mind. It was terrible to hear that all her money was gone, but she had yet to realize what want of money, of even a very small sum of it, meant. Indeed, when she was told that a poor little hundred and fifty a year which had been bequeathed to her by an old uncle was still left to her, she threw aside all monetary cares at once, and surrendered herself entirely to that more engrossing

misery of watching for a change, that never came, in the form of her unconscious husband.

“He has been *such* a father, and *such* a husband,” she would say weepingly to the few friends who were allowed to see her at this juncture; “his one thought has been the welfare of his children—especially of Gilbert. For Gilbert he seemed to feel he could never do enough.”

Though Gilbert never left his mother’s side in these days, he did not leave Florence’s heart to ache in uncertainty. He wrote to her, wrote such letters as an honorable gentleman should write to the woman he has chosen to be his wife and helpmeet. There was a strong undercurrent of trust and affection running through the sentences, in which he told her of their painful reverse of fortune. But there was no sentiment, only a sure reliance that she was so entirely in accord with him, that she would help him to do everything that was kindest and most generous for his mother and sisters.

Florence, in her pride that it was so, fell on her knees and thanked God in a rapture of mingled humility and exultation for having given her the love of such a man, adding the vow to her thanksgiving that nothing should ever part her from him, and that for ever she would banish the false pride which had made her regret that he was above her in rank. So, at least, the love affair between these young people promised well.

Meantime, a change had come over Doctor Sheffield. Finding that Florence could be as resolved as he was himself, and being quite alive to the advantages a married medical man has over an unmarried one in the country, he leisurely turned his attention towards Kathleen, who kindly attributed his tardiness to timid-

ity. Indeed, it is upon record that she definitely accepted his offer before he made it. But this may be mere Caddleton spite, for it is certain that he would never have let loose an impression so derogatory to the dignity of the lady he had, after so much hesitation, “deigned”—for the word “delighted” barely fits his case—to honor. However, whatever he may have felt when he had once surrendered unconditionally to the girl who had been his hopeless worshipper for so many years, it is certain that Kathleen herself conceived her fate to be as joyful a one as the most exacting girl could desire.

She was sometimes a little exasperating in her happiness even to her mother, who often found herself turning with satisfaction to contemplate the more dignified way in which her other daughter played *her* far more difficult part. From the moment that he gave her permission to do it—for that really is the most correct way of describing the manner in which he acquiesced in his engagement—Kathleen caused her whole conversation to curvet round his Christian name, and projected her mind entirely into *his* existence, to the exclusion of other people. The light labors which she had hitherto fulfilled easily enough became irksome to her, consequently she executed them badly. Then complaints arose, and, in defending herself against these, she implicated him by almost avowing that he was the cause of her negligence. When he came to know this, it annoyed him, and, in order to avert his annoyance, Kathleen became more slavishly abject in her adoration than before.

There was something pitiful in the position of this pair towards each other, Mrs. Maunders felt, and though she did not like Doctor Sheffield, her sympathies were not altogether with her own child. That

the man had only taken the latter because he had failed in getting another girl whom he wanted was a deplorable fact. But then Kathleen did not know this. Therefore, the excuse of being desirous of making good her position by ultra attention to him was not hers. Hers indeed was only the desire of the moth for the star. So long as the star shone above her, however ungraciously, she would flutter her feeble wings towards it, bringing them recklessly against whatever obstacles impeded their course. Unconscious, or blindly forgetful of the fact that if they were bruised in the days of courtship by the treatment, they would be utterly destroyed by it when once the utterance of the marriage vow had fettered their flight forever.

Unconscious, or blindly forgetful, or whatever it might be that Kathleen was about the sure results of her present idolatry, one thing was certain, she was never reasonably contented or decently agreeable out of the presence of her idol. She showered invitations upon him to come to her mother's house in season and out of season with a calm, unruffled air of being his one object in life that nearly distracted him at times.

"If you can't come to lunch to-day, you'll come to supper of course, dear Ned?" she would say, with the happy smile of conviction of one who is assured that she is proposing the most pleasant path to the beloved. When he would try to crawl out of or writhen himself free of the supper, as he had of the luncheon, she would felicitously find another opportunity for him.

"If you like, I'll walk on the Wreymouth road to meet you as you come back in the afternoon; you'll have the dog-cart, won't you, to-day? and I do so love driving, and as you can't come to supper to-night, come to supper to-morrow, and I'll take care there's

something you like. I'm getting to know your tastes, you see, dear—a kippered haddock and some tomatoes. Now, you'll come, won't you, Ned? "

Doctor Sheffield breathed a brief but fervent prayer to the effect that he hoped never to see tomatoes or kippers again.

As a love-sick, often hopeless and despairing girl, Kathleen had been pathetic. As a right openly and scarcely engaged one, she was wearingly on the alert, in his or her own interests, in a way that sometimes made him feel ashamed of her. His punishment for not being absolutely sincere regarding her was commencing already in fact. Had he really loved her, and looked forward to a life spent with her with unmitigated bliss, he would have endeavored to save her from making herself ridiculous. As it was, when he heard her half-pleading, half-authoritatively demanding some petty alteration in the trivial domestic round on his account, he looked and felt sheepish, but refrained from interfering.

"Why demand so much of Doctor Sheffield's time and attention, Kathleen?" the mother would ask sometimes, when Kathleen had been resentfully denouncing those professional claims which had taken him away from the peaceful prospect of an evening spent in looking at her.

"It's natural I should wish to see him, mother."

"Quite natural, dear, but you've seen him twice to-day already."

"What's *that*, when one has so much to say?" Kathleen asked, scornfully compassionate of their mediocre experience of her state of mind.

"You don't seem to have much to say when he is here," Florence remarked bluntly. "You are so taken up with gazing at him, and calling him 'Ned,' and

'Dear Ned,' and 'Ned Dear,' that you forget to work, or read, or sing, or speak to any one else when he's present. *I call it silly.*"

"You may call it what you like, Flo'. You don't know what it is. You're not engaged."

The future Lady Rollamore bore even this aspersion upon her attractiveness good-naturedly.

"If I were, I don't think I should want to be always gaping at the man I was engaged to, and I won't wear his Christian name out by such constant repetition as you do, Kathleen. But now, be a dear! and as he isn't here this evening to absorb all your faculties, help me to plan out this striped cambric for a blouse."

"Ned doesn't like blouses. He says it gives girls such a good chance of pinching their waists. You can draw the belt in to any extent, you see."

"I shall not draw my belt in to any pernicious extent, and Doctor Sheffield may dismiss all anxiety concerning my waist from his mind. Now, will you help me?"

"Yes, when I've finished this wash-stand back for Ned's room."

"What on earth can a man *want* of a silk-embroidered washstand?" Florence asked impatiently. "If you 'furnish up' to that, I shall be afraid to come into your house when my boots are muddy or dirty, and as it's always muddy or dirty in Caddleton, see what a pleasure you'll deprive me off."

"It's not kind to indulge in prophetic sneers about my house and furniture," Kathleen said, haughtily. "I shall have the best Ned can give me. We want to go to Parkhouse's together, mother, and get everything straight off at once."

"What an interesting way of furnishing," Florence

laughed. "Don't be angry, Kathleen, but it does sound to me such a deadly, wholesale way of going to work. 'So many of this,' and 'so many of that.' You'll have no time for the display of individual taste."

"There's no need for me to display it. Dear Ned's taste is perfect."

"He displayed it, at any rate, when he chose you, you dear affectionate goose," Florence said, tenderly. And then, in a gush of emotional confidence, Kathleen confessed how worse than idiotic she had been in even thinking that her own dear Ned had cared for Florence, or anybody else. "But a girl never *can* be quite sure till a man speaks. Can she, Flo?"

Florence quite agreed with her.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE NEW LORD ROLLAMORE.

It was all over! Lord Rollamore, the fourteenth baron of that ilk, had passed away in the night, and every one but his wife and children declared it to be a "very good thing that he had made way for a better man than himself."

For Gilbert's popularity was universal. There was no one found to say any but good words of him. Though he had improved the condition of the laborer on his father's estates, he had not won the ill-will of the tenants in doing it. All men, in fact, gave Gilbert Kilburn a "fair wind" to the title and estates.

He did not think it indecorous to go and see the girl he loved even before the funeral. He was called "Mr. Kilburn" still in the nature of things until after that

event, but he was "Lord Rollamore" for all that, and it was as "Lord Rollamore" that he desired to reassure Florence, and show her that he at least did not deem that, in mating with him, she would take upon herself the burden of an honor unto which she was not born.

So he went over to Caddleton in his mother's little brougham, which waited outside "Maunders's" for an hour. No one suspected that the lord of the land was there consulting the future lady of it. People thought that Maunders's was a convenient place for him to despatch and receive telegrams in. So Florence's true, sweet story remained unrevealed to her townsfolk. But all her family were made duly cognizant of it.

"There must be no concealment now between us and our people on either side," he told Florence. "My mother knows it already, and Fergus will be told to-night. It is only right that Kathleen and Sheffield should hear of it at once from us."

How she idolized him for the considerate generosity which made him identify himself with her relations in this unhesitating, frank manner! How fervently again she registered the vow that "nothing — nothing — *nothing*" should ever part her from him!

When he left her, it was with the understanding that he would not see her again until after his father's funeral.

"Then I shall come and take you to my mother," he said.

"Won't she think me rather brutal to take my happiness into the midst of her sorrow, Gilbert?"

"No, indeed, for I make your happiness, and she's my mother. You needn't be afraid of her, Flo."

"I'll never be afraid of anything again," she said.

A secret anxiety that was terrible in its intensity, and

pitiful in its helplessness, was wasting Mrs. Maunders's vitality during these days. But we have nothing whatever to do with this, for though it concerned the people the story of whose lives is being told, it had no influence upon them, and did not alter or forward the events which are to follow in any way.

At length the day of the funeral came. Gilbert Kilburn followed his father to the grave, and came back to Parventon "Lord Rollamore." Then the family assembled in the library, and Mr. Wyndham proceeded to read the will.

What had come over the usually composed old lawyer? His voice broke, and, after punctuating the opening sentence with sobs, he came to a dead pause. There was a grievous silence in the room for a minute or two; then Gilbert spoke,—

"I'm afraid there is something painful that you have to read to us? Let me take my mother away, and then, I think, you'll find that we Kilburns are stout-hearted enough to bear anything with tolerable cheerfulness."

"Not this, not this, my dear boy, my poor boy!" Mr. Wyndham faltered out, while Lady Rollamore said decisively,—

"I will not go away, Gilbert. Your dear father may not have left the wealth that he desired for you, but—there can be nothing else."

"At any rate, read on," the new Lord Rollamore said quietly. Then Mr. Wyndham read on.

Deprived of all legal frills of phraseology, the will of the late Lord Rollamore might have been put in a nutshell. The title and the whole of the property went by law and nature to his eldest son, "Francis White Kilburn," hitherto known as "Francis White." To his younger children, Gilbert, Fergus, and the two daugh-

ters, he left his blessing, and a prayer for their forgiveness for the deception he had practiced upon them and their mother all their lives.

Lady Rollamore heard the truth to the bitter end. For a moment or two her mind went wildly groping about for evidence to refute this awful statement. But the darkness was too great, too horrible. With a moan that it wrung her children's heart to hear, she fell back in her chair faint with a faintness that was so much like death that all the energies of her children were bent upon the task of calling her back from the grim gates instead of expending them in fruitless lamentation. But when his mother had been taken to her own room, Gilbert remembered that the same blow which had felled his mother had maimed him for life.

"You knew of this?" he said to Mr. Wyndham: "you were not surprised? I saw that, and I remembered that you had always seemed as fond of me as my own father was. Why did you do it?"

The old lawyer put his hand on Gilbert's arm.

"I couldn't help it, my boy. He bound me silent. He couldn't bear the thought of your mother's disappointment after he had once let her believe you were the heir. And I—what could I do, Gilbert? His love for your mother and you made him weak, and even in his weakness I loved your father too well to betray the secret that poisoned his existence."

"Who was my bro— Who was Lord Rollamore's mother?" Gilbert asked miserably. It was all so crushingly wretched, still the poor young fellow would force himself to say something that might help to lift Mr. Wyndham out of that morass of self-reproach in which he was floundering.

"She was a Miss White."

"She died, I suppose, when this boy was born?"

“ No, she did not die,” Mr. Wyndham said, uneasily ;
“ she—she—did not die.”

“ Good heavens, you don’t mean that she was alive when he married my mother ? ” Gilbert gasped.

“ Alive ! but divorced. Oh, yes, it’s a miserable story, Gilbert. If she had not been a guilty woman, none of these complications would have arisen.”

“ In other words, we wretched younger Kilburns wouldn’t have been born,” Gilbert said, grimly. “ Tell me all now ! Where is the new Lord Rollamore to be found ? *You* know, I suppose ? ”

Mr. Wyndham inclined his head in assent.

“ Is he worthy of being my father’s son and heir ? It’s not the way I ought to word the question, but you must know what I feel about it. Has he been left to the influence of his mother, or—”

“ No, poor fellow,” Mr. Wyndham interrupted ; “ he had better have been the orphan he believes himself to be, than have been cursed with a father who was ashamed of him, and a mother of whom he has reason to be ashamed. You know him, Gilbert, as Francis White, the artist.”

“ *That* æsthetic fraud my father’s son ? ”

“ There is no doubt about it. It has been my duty to follow his career closely. Your father never saw him, voluntarily, from the day he married your mother, nor did he ever trouble himself to make any inquiry respecting his eldest son. The shock of hearing from me that Gilbert White, the artist, whom he despised, was his own son, and was a guest in his own house, was too much for your father. It brought on that attack from which he never recovered.”

“ This was the secret he promised to tell us the day following my announcement of my engagement ; poor father, how he must have suffered,” Fergus said piti-

fully. He was not wronged to the same extent as his brother Gilbert, and could therefore face the facts and the future with greater equanimity than was Gilbert's portion at present.

"And now, in further fulfilment of your duty, you'll inform Lord Rollamore of the change in his position, Wyndham?"

"I must do that at once."

"We—my mother and all of us will turn out without delay," Gilbert said, stoutly. "I must try to get some employment by which I can maintain my sisters and myself, for we are practically penniless. Fortunately—happily I am not married."

"But you're engaged, Gilbert? Mamma told us of your engagement to that pretty Miss Maunders, the old doctor's daughter," one of his sisters put in.

"I must ask Florence to release me," Gilbert said bitterly; "poor girl, I won't drag her down to the miserable level to which my father's culpable deception has consigned me."

"Don't be harsh to his memory, old chap; it's rough on you, I know, and I wish with all my heart that the heaviest blow had fallen on my shoulders instead of on yours."

Fergus spoke with the cheerful resignation of one who is quite as well off as he had anticipated being. His disappointment had been the loss of his mother's money, and that he had lived through and lived down. From his father he had never expected anything, and he had not narrowly escaped being Lord Rollamore. Consequently, he bore his brother's grievance uncomplainingly.

"It's *awful* to think that Gilbert will be nobody, and that odious Mr. White, who is going to marry that old woman for her money, will be Lord Rollamore," one of the sisters sobbed.

“To leave Parkventon after it’s been made so lovely, and we’ve been here such a little time, it seems now,” wailed the other.

“I do hope mamma will go abroad. We might live quite cheaply in Germany, couldn’t we, Gilbert?”

“I’m afraid you will have to put up with a London suburb,” Gilbert answered sorrowfully. “My dear sisters, don’t harass me about the future yet. I will do the best I can for our mother and you, but that ‘best’ will seem very bad to you, I fear.”

“Your father has left a written request in my hands to your brother, Lord Rollamore, asking him to allow your mother an income out of the estate adequate to her position,” Mr. Wyndham said, tentatively.

“Which my mother will never touch,” said Gilbert firmly. “We will owe nothing to Lord Rollamore’s generosity.”

“You must not deprive Lady Rollamore of what is her right, Gilbert.”

“Ah, Wyndham it seems to me that my mother and her children have no rights,” Gilbert said, bitterly, and then they looked through the will again and found no comfort therein.

The announcement of the astonishing truth came upon the household first, and Caddleton and the neighborhood directly afterwards, with crushing force. Doctor Sheffield heard it while on his afternoon round, and, though it was not such a surprise to him as it was to the majority, he was desperately staggered and pained by it.

“The letter that I found in one of old Doctor Maunders’s books must be shown to Gilbert Kilburn now, or a complication too hideous for contemplation will arise,” he told himself. But how to show that letter, how to introduce the painful subject without seeming intrusive and malicious?

“She will be my mother-in-law ; he can’t think that I would let her down if I could see my way to avoid doing so,” he said to himself, as with the letter in his pocket, he made his way to Parkventon that evening.

Mr. Kilburn was at home, alone in the library, he was told, and he hastily scribbled on his card,—

“Kindly give me an interview. Important business.
—Yours sincerely,

“EDWARD SHEFFIELD.”

Mr. Kilburn granted the interview, and Doctor Sheffield was committed beyond all power of withdrawal to the most unpleasant task that circumstances had ever forced upon him.

CHAPTER XV.

A PAGE FROM THE PAST.

THE important, horribly condemning letter, written twenty-four years ago by Mrs. Maunders to her husband in the early days of their marriage, during one of her few brief absences from home, had been read by Gilbert Kilburn, and was now lying open on the table, on which he was resting his elbows—his face partially concealed by one hand. At a little distance from him sat Doctor Sheffield, watching with painful anxiety the storm of feeling which was almost convulsing Gilbert Kilburn. The letter will help to explain the complication. It ran as follows :—

“BAXTON, *August 10th.*

“MY DEAR HUSBAND,—I am longing to be back with you and my darling little daughter. Still, thank you

for having sent me here. I have seen the dear little boy. He is called Francis White, as Lord Rollamore means to keep him in ignorance of his right to the name of Kilburn till after his (Lord Rollamore's) death. He has *quite* forgotten me, which perhaps is just as well. Lord Rollamore's cruelty in casting off his own legitimate son because that son's unhappy mother erred against him is inconceivable. How could I have been infatuated with such a man? But infatuated I was, and had not you held out a rescuing hand, where should I have been now?—Your grateful, loving wife,

“FLORENCE MAUNDERS.”

“What was Mrs. Maunders's maiden name?” Gilbert asked at last, with an effort, and the answer that he feared came.

“White.”

“Then she is the mother of my father's eldest son—of Lord Rollamore?”

“There is no doubt about it in my mind,” Doctor Sheffield said, sadly. “I have known it for a long time, and I should have kept it secret had you not become engaged to Florence. As it is, I had no alternative but to tell you.”

“You had no alternative.”

“She was your father's first wife. She is the mother of your half-brother—”

“I know what you mean,” Gilbert interrupted impatiently. “Good heavens, man, don't think that I'm ungrateful! You have stopped me on the brink of an abyss. I must give up Florence.”

“And you must give her up without condemning her mother? I have the right to demand that of you, for I am going to marry Kathleen, and I am bound to

protect the name of my wife's mother to the utmost."

"I must give up Florence," Gilbert repeated slowly. "I must give up the girl I love better than my life. This morning I was glorying in the thought of what I could do for her, and of how she would help me to do my duty in the splendid position I believed myself called upon to fill. Now I know myself to be—rightly enough—ousted from that position, without a penny in the world that I can call my own. But I shouldn't have felt all this to be unbearably hard if I could honorably claim Florence. As it is, I must give her up, in what will seem an underhand, hole-and-corner sort of way to her. For the sake of 'protecting her mother's name,' as you say, I must let the girl I love think me a weak, feeble-hearted sort of fellow, who is so afraid of poverty that he'll break his vow, and renounce her rather than work for her. But I'll do it without flinching, Sheffield, don't fear that I shall fail."

"The knowledge that the alliance would be an unnatural one will help you to get over your disappointment," Doctor Sheffield remarked, with calm philosophy.

"I can't go into that part of the subject. I'm not sure whether or not the table of affinity provides for such a contingency as a man's wanting to marry the daughter of his father's first wife. But I know my own feeling revolts at the idea."

"Exactly! that proves it to be 'unnatural,' from your point of view as well as from mine. Shall you see Florence?"

"*That* is impossible. It would be the one straw too much. I'll write to her at once, though. My poor girl! my poor Flo! This page from her mother's past has blighted her life."

Doctor Sheffield did not say, "She would have been wiser and happier if she had fixed her affections on me instead of aiming at you," but he thought it.

"It would be presumptuous on my part to say, that if you have any plans in which I can be of the slightest assistance to you, I trust you will command me, Kilburn."

"Not presumptuous at all, but considerate," Gilbert said, heartily. "Just now I have no plans beyond getting my poor mother and sisters out of this house, to which we no longer have a right, as speedily as possible. After that I must look out for a situation as agent, or bailiff—something by which I can help to maintain them."

"Lord Rollamore, your brother—he is that, remember—will probably be glad of your continued services in superintending and managing the estate. The whole property has increased in value, and every employee on it is in more prosperous cases since you have been acting as your father's agent and adviser."

"It may even come to that. I may be compelled to take service gratefully under Lord Rollamore."

"If he has anything of the Kilburn in him, and if you are disposed to meet him without prejudice, there is no need for the relations between you to be unpleasant," Doctor Sheffield observed, with the liberal unselfishness of one who was not personally concerned in the matter.

"I shall never be unreasonable enough to resent on him the injury that has been done to me by our father. You can't realize what it is, Sheffield. I've been son and heir all my life, and for a few hours I've been 'Lord Rollamore.' Now I'm suddenly made aware that I've been an impostor in both positions—an innocent one, but still an impostor. The situation doesn't admit of

argument at present, and I've no wish to be led into any expression of mere feeling."

"I can only repeat, command me if can ever be of the slightest service to you," Doctor Sheffield said deferentially, for he felt more genuine sympathy and regret for what had befallen Gilbert Kilburn than would have been his portion had he not at one time suffered pangs of jealousy and uncharitable envy on account of the then fortunate, but now most luckless, young man.

"I may soon take you at your word, doctor. Mine will be a very practical, work-a-day life on a low rung of the ladder, probably."

"You have given up the idea of taking Orders?"

"Entirely."

"Florence shall understand clearly from me that you have not been actuated by any idle caprice in following the course you are compelled to pursue," Doctor Sheffield promised, as he took his leave, feeling more down-hearted for his defeated and dethroned rival than he had ever felt for another human being in the course of his hitherto selfish life.

"Not even Wyndham shall know that the unfortunate woman who has lived so blamelessly at Caddleton for the last twenty-five years is the guilty wife and heartless mother who deserted my father and her child. She shall never be shamed by being made known to and disowned by her son Lord Rollamore—if I can help it," Gilbert promised himself earnestly as he went about the heart-breaking task of writing the explanatory letter to Florence, which would put an impassable barrier between them forever.

Mr. Wyndham, meantime, had found little difficulty in tracing out the new Lord Rollamore. The firm who had acted for the lawyer and his patron in the matter

of Francis White were ready to be the medium of communication still with their ennobled client, but at this juncture Mr. Wyndham felt that he must take the matter into his own hands. He, and he only, knew of these extenuating circumstances which might plead with the disowned for forgiveness of his father. He, Wyndham, and he only (so he believed), knew what the career of the new Lord Rollamore's mother had been up to the time of her elopement, for which her husband had divorced her. After that event he had lost sight of her altogether, but, some years after, a vague rumor had reached him to the effect that her lover had deserted her, and that she had gone down to the dogs. It had not been his business to make inquiries concerning her fate, and it would have appalled him now to hear that Doctor Sheffield had established the identity of gentle, highly-respected Mrs. Maunders of Caddleton with that of the false wife and frail woman who had turned the late Lord Rollamore's wholesome heart to gall.

So he took the address of the artist poet, and drove to the studio in which Mrs. Torrens had found the handsome model from whom Francis White was painting the figure of Elaine. From the same smart boy who had so mercilessly projected the rich widow into the midst of the Bohemian group, the lawyer got Mr. White's address, and the information that his "master was to be married the next day."

"The cup will be dashed from the widow's lips, I fancy," Wyndham thought, smiling dryly; "Lord Rollamore will think twice before he marries his grandmother—and then he won't do it."

But the fates favored Mrs. Torrens this day, and were unpropitious to the scheme of furthering Lord Rollamore's. He had gone down to the country to

stay at a bachelor friend's house, "where," the discreet mistress of the house in which he had chambers professed not to know.

So the only thing that remained for Mr. Wyndham to do was to wait, and go down the following morning to the house of the bride-elect, there to await the bridegroom and give him the great news.

In a certain way it was to be an old-fashioned wedding. The happy pair were to be made man and wife at eleven o'clock in the morning, and were to come back to a sumptuous breakfast. When Mrs. Torrens—already attired in her bridal splendor of old gold silk, and satin, priceless point lace, and diamonds that made one blink to look at her—saw the name of the uninvited guest, she remembered him as a fellow-guest at Parkventon, and forthwith bustled down with a hospitably pressing invitation for him to stay and join in the festivities. It seemed almost cruel to give her the news of that great stroke of good fortune, which would probably smite her apart from the man for whom she was ready to pay such a heavy price. Still, Mr. Wyndham nerved himself to the task, and gave her the skeleton of the story as briefly and succinctly as he could.

Her first words gave him a better impression of her than he had wished to have.

"I'm disappointed that it should be so in a way, Mr. Wyndham. I wanted to make him independent of the world, and looked up to as rich people are looked up to. I wanted to do it by myself alone. D'ye see? I had no mean intention of keeping him dependent on me. I meant, as soon as we were married, to give the sole control for his own use and benefit, to do as he pleased, with nearly everything I have. He won't

value it now he's Lord Rollamore, with a large income of his own."

"You are very generous, Mrs. Torrens. I trust Lord Rollamore's gratitude will equal your generosity."

"Gratitude! he'll have no call to show much 'gratitude' now. He'll have plenty without mine, though I shall give it to him just the same. Still, one can't expect a person to show or to feel as much gratitude for a gift that's not of much value to them, as for one that's just everything. He'll give me as good, or better, than I can give him; he'll give me a title, you see. It's something to be Lady Rollamore."

Mr. Wyndham bowed his head assentingly in silence, and Mrs. Torrens's face suddenly assumed an expression of heart-rending anxiety.

"You're not thinking that he will try to get out of the marriage now, are you, Mr. Wyndham? Oh, he couldn't—he couldn't be so base. You've no right to suspect him of such a meanness, and falseness, and badness. I despise you for thinking such low things of a man, and he your old friend's son, too, as you've just been telling me. Don't mind what I say," the agitated lady went on imploringly, "I'm half-distracted at the bare doubt you've put into my mind."

"My dear madam, I have said nothing," Mr. Wyndham interrupted soothingly.

"Your face spoke your thought just as plainly as your lips could have spoken, Mr. Wyndham, and I shall find it hard to forgive you for harboring such thoughts of him. Why, I worship the ground he treads on; and you to think he'd throw me over because it's found out that he's a lord instead of only a gentleman! There, do forgive me, Mr. Wyndham; but, if I am talking like a madwoman, I'm only talking as I'm feeling. He'll

be here in a few minutes now. Oh, if you'd only keep back your news till after the wedding, I'd bless you and benefit you, too !”

She dried her tears and turned her unhappy, mottled, swollen face towards him beseechingly, but he could not hesitate for a moment between justice and mercy. Perhaps, if she had been a fair young being, pleading for the retention of her honor at the cost of Mr. Wyndham's conscience being slightly strained, he might have listened to the voice of the charmer. As it was, he was inexorable.

“ I have no choice in the matter, Mrs. Torrens. My duty to Lord Rollamore compels me to communicate the change that has taken place in his circumstances and position to him without delay.”

“ Pity your duty didn't lead you to tell him the truth sooner ; I might have been spared some trouble and some mortification,” the now angry woman gasped out spasmodically as she hurried out of the room.

Then, for an hour, Mr. Wyndham had to resign himself to waiting with such patience as he could command for the arrival of the new Lord Rollamore. While he waited passively, Mrs. Torrens acted.

The bridegroom was waiting before the altar rails, and all the richly-robed friends and acquaintances of “ Mrs. Mammon,” as Mrs. Torrens was called by the majority of them, were ranged with a capital eye to spectacular effect, when the bride appeared, shaking with emotion, and leaning on the arm of her lawyer, who gave her away.

Fortunately—for her—there was no delay.

The binding sentences fell with solemn glibness from the clergyman's lips ; the binding ring was forced upon her fat finger without hesitation ; the ceremony, in fact, proceeded and was concluded “ without an 'itch any-

where," as one of the city Cræsus observed. In short, Lord Rollamore and the relict of the late Thomas Torrens were made man and wife as firmly as the ordinances of the Church and the law of the land could make them. Then, having carried her point, the bride, feeling horribly frightened, carried her husband home to hear the truth about himself from Mr. Wyndham, the lawyer of the Rollamore family.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PLEASURES OF POVERTY.

HUMILIATION followed fast upon Lady Rollamore's victory. The storm of reproach and invective which her new lord and master discharged at her as soon as he comprehended his own case would not be edifying were it recorded. It is enough to say that he showed himself in such revoltingly selfish colors that the unfortunate woman, who, by her own trick of concealment, had become his wife, would have unmarried herself on the spot had she been able to do it.

"I'll get the marriage annulled. It can't be legal, as I married her under the name of White, my right name being Kilburn. I've been led into a fraud by the brutality of my father and the sly perfidy of the woman who has tricked me into making her my wife," he said to Mr. Wyndham, in the presence of the luckless woman who was paying a more severe penalty for her folly than fools are generally called upon to pay.

"You'll find yourself foiled in that attempt, and make yourself an object of public ridicule in making it," Mr. Wyndham observed coolly. "The law of the land, as

well as public opinion, will be against you, and you can't afford to defy either, Lord Rollamore. Remember, you have your way still to make in society. You start heavily handicapped."

"I may ask, whose fault is that?"

"You may, but the question is frivolous. Your father's faulty conduct towards you has been, and is, a terrible misfortune for you. By your own conduct you may avert, and finally entirely overcome, the consequences of the misfortune under which you have labored all your life. But you'll have to move warily, and if you start by outraging the claims of the lady you have just made your wife, you will commence by setting all honorable and right-minded people against you."

"I am not disposed to listen to amateur lecturers, Mr. Wyndham. I may ask you for legal advice, but I shall regard advice on social and domestic affairs as—impertinence."

"After that remark, Lord Rollamore, I must request that you seek another legal adviser, to whom I shall be glad immediately to transfer all papers and documents relating to your business and property."

Then the two men bowed stiffly, and Mr. Wyndham departed, leaving Lord Rollamore.

"He can't divorce me, that's one comfort," Lady Rollamore said to her daughter, when describing this interview to her; "that Mr. Wyndham put it to him beautifully and clearly. He can't get rid of me as he would wish, the selfish fellow, or rob me of my title, for the law of the land and public opinion would both be against him," Mr. Wyndham said."

"Mamma, if I were you I'd never see him or speak to him again after his brutally insulting conduct to you."

“ Yes, you would, my dear, if you were me ; you’d make allowances for his head being a little turned at the time by suddenly hearing that he was a lord.”

“ I could never make allowances for a man behaving like a brute in consideration of his being a snob.”

“ He can’t be a snob, my dear May, because he’s nobly born. You must allow that you’ve been mistaken all along in declaring him to be no gentleman.”

“ I declare it still more emphatically than ever, and if in the end he were to turn out a Duke, I should still have penetration enough to see the snob under the strawberry leaves. How glad I was when all those people went to-day ! A wedding breakfast at which the bridegroom wouldn’t appear because he had heard in the interim between that and the wedding that he was rather a grander person than he had believed himself to be before, was such a ghastly mockery. Be dignified. Let him go, mother, without a word.”

“ I couldn’t, May ; I’ll have something to show for what I’ve suffered to-day. I shall go down to Park-venton, whether he likes it or not, when he goes to take his place among the county aristocracy, if it’s only for seeing how that stuck-up woman, the dowager Lady Rollamore, will look when she sees me.”

“ Don’t gloat over them. Remember, *I* shall belong to those Kilburns soon, and I’m so proud of them.”

“ They’ve never shown upstart airs to you, have they ? ”

“ Mamma, dear, not being upstarts, you see they couldn’t do it. They leave such things as upstart airs to their half-brother.”

“ It’s a curious case altogether,” Lady Rollamore said, with unwonted thoughtfulness. “ It’s like the marriage mixing up in the Royal family, almost. I shall be sister-in-law to my own daughter, and mother-

in-law to my brother-in-law, when you marry Fergus. It's quite confusing."

Very shortly a stiff letter from Lord Rollamore's newly-appointed man of business, inquiring when Park-venton would be empty, in order that preparations for the reception of his client might be made without delay, spurred Gilbert on to remove his mother and sisters at once.

A small house, standing in its own high-hedged garden, in a lane that led down from the High Street to the river, was the house to which he took them. The cottage, for it was little more, had been vacant for some time, and the damp had got in and destroyed the papers, which, even in their pristine purity, had been hideous. But "we can alter all that in a few weeks," he said; "papers are cheap enough."

"And we'll make at least one room lovely for mamma," the sisters said, hopefully. "All the prettiest things that belong to us shall go into her sanctum. Don't look grave, Gilbert, we'll be very happy here."

It really was better than they had expected, when they finally moved in. Some few bits of really good old furniture that the widowed Lady Rollamore had picked up at different times in Belgium and Italy, made quite a fair show in the little cottage rooms. The garden, which had gone into a state of luxuriant ruin, was soon weeded, and pruned, and trimmed back into beauty. It had a tidy lawn encircled by gigantic azaleas and rhododendron bushes, and near the centre of this a fine beathania spread its branches abroad, covered in early summer with its delicately pale, yellow, butterfly-like flowers. Down at the bottom of the garden, the Cad flowed kindly, just inside the hedge of their little domain. Altogether, there were possibilities about the place that made the plucky young people feel pleased

and contented, at least while the work of organizing and arranging things lasted.

But when that was over, and they settled down to the new life, it was very hard to keep up the aspect of cheerful contentment. The poor widow lady, who had been a wealthy and luxuriously-inclined woman all her life, looked at her nearly empty cash-box with dismay, and realized with dismay that what that poor, nearly empty box contained was all that stood between pauperism and herself and children, until her next quarter's pittance should be due. While her two daughters wore themselves out in endeavoring to teach what they did not know themselves, namely, the duties of "general servant" to a gaping, wide-mouthed, waddling young woman, who had come to them from a "Penitentiary" for low wages.

"Mamma must never feel the loss of a maid," the daughters had decided at the outset, so one of them told herself off to the daily dutiful task of doing every morning all that Lady Rollamore's clever French maid had been wont to do in the old days. Her early cup of tea was never forgotten, and it was not the asthmatic penitent who made and brought it up, with delicately-cut bread and butter, to her bedside. Her bath, heated to the exact temperature, was never omitted. Then, when it came to the other part of the toilet, they would tell her that "it was so nice to have a gossip with her in her own room, like they did when they were children;" so she let them wait on her and dress her hair, "for their pleasure," as she thought, dear, loving, deluded soul.

But some little troubles they could not keep from her. The daily paper, and new books from the library, could be no longer afforded, so many hours of the day and

night passed heavily for the woman who had now no society claims upon her time and interest.

Gilbert was often away from home seeking for employment in London, and not finding it. It is astonishing how difficult it is to find employment that is not absolutely unremunerative when one is in earnest—and poor ! Two months ago the Honorable Gilbert Kilburn could have gone into anything into which he aspired to enter, whether he could show adequate fitness for the career or not. But now he had to listen to unpalatable truths concerning his want of experience, lack of training, and general unsuitability from every employer's lips. He was still the Honorable Gilbert Kilburn, but he was not the future Lord Rollamore ! Men who would have been proud to receive the most distant recognition from him in the old days, patted him on the shoulder, and reminded him of this now. They only "patted him once, though," for he had a way of looking as if he might mistake a second pat for a blow—and return it.

"You want experience, you see ; *not* having capital, unfortunately, you haven't experience," he was told time after time, until he found he got through the business of being rejected rather faster and less exasperatingly if he prefaced his application by saying,—

"I have neither money nor experience. Will you give me—so-and-so ?"

Then he was told, with exasperating circumlocution, that without "money or experience," etc., etc., "he could not be received into such-and-such" a branch, or office, or whatever it might be for which he was applying.

Funds were very low with him. It was worse than useless—it was practically impossible for him to remain any longer in London. He had refused to be Mr. Wynd-

ham's guest, on the ground that he could not be fettered by the conventionalities of social life while he was looking out for employment. Now it had come to this : he could no longer pay even for the humble lodgings he was occupying.

"I must go down to the Caddleton cottage and offer my services as agent, steward, hind, *anything*, to some of the neighboring landowners who knew my father," he told Mr. Wyndham, half hoping that Mr. Wyndham would try to dissuade him from so far voluntarily humiliating himself. He was more surprised than pleased, therefore, when the lawyer replied,—

"Quite right, my boy ! Go where you are known, and don't repel any brotherly advances Lord Rollamore may make. He is not to blame, remember, for having been defrauded of the position and consideration which was his birthright all these years."

"There are other circumstances besides those connected with Lord Rollamore which make it almost impossible I should live at Caddleton. The situation, if I'm compelled to accept it, will be unbearably painful and unpleasant."

Then he told Mr. Wyndham of his brief engagement to Florence Maunders, and of his having broken it off, assigning his poverty-stricken condition as the reason for his having done so.

"I think you were wrong, Gilbert. Miss Maunders has, to my certain knowledge, been brought up wisely, well, and thriftily. She wouldn't have exchanged a life of idle luxury for one of penury in marrying you."

"Did you know the doctor?" Gilbert asked.

"No. Your father never went to Parkventon after his first wedding-visit until last year. I never met Doctor Maunders, therefore."

"Do you know Mrs. Maunders?"

“ I have not that pleasure, but I hear she is a most excellent lady.”

“ You can tell me nothing about her—nothing of her antecedents?” Gilbert asked anxiously, and he scorned himself for having made the inquiry when the lawyer replied decisively,—

“ She is an absolute stranger to me, but I admired what I heard of her when I was down at Parkventon. She was a brave woman to start a shop in the little country town in which she had lived as the wife of a professional man. The daughter of such a mother ought to have good stuff in her.”

“ She has splendid stuff in her.”

Then show that you have equally splendid stuff in you, Gilbert. Put the poorer part of your pride aside, renew your engagement, and marry her as soon as you feel justified in taking the responsibility upon yourself.”

“ I shall never marry her—or any other woman.”

“ Nonsense, man ! your circumstances aren't always going to be as bad as they are at present.”

“ Don't speak about it any more, Wyndham. If I became possessed of the wealth of the Rothschilds to-morrow, it would still be impossible for me to marry Florence Maunders.”

“ He has heard something about her that has annoyed him, and he is implacable and unforgiving as his father was before him. Who knows but if my poor old friend had believed his wife instead of her traducer, she might have been his honored widow now, instead of being the degraded outcast I fear she is?”

There was no one to answer this question, so Mr Wyndham discreetly did not ask it aloud.

Gilbert Kilburn went back to Caddleton in a heavily disturbed frame of mind.

The difficulties that had met and baffled him while he had been seeking for even lowly-remunerated work in London had forced the knowledge of that ghastly truth upon him, that however willing a man may be to labor, the labor itself may be denied to him.

“ If I’d only myself to think of, I’d enlist or go as a gamekeeper ; but neither a private’s pay nor a gamekeeper’s salary would be of any use to my mother and the girls, and clearly they can’t live on what they’ve got,” he said to Doctor Sheffield, when they were talking things over the night of his return.

“ Will you see your brother—”

“ Fergus? Poor chap, he can’t help me.”

“ I meant your other brother, Lord Rollamore. He expressed himself to me to-day as being greatly disturbed at the persistent way in which you all hold aloof from him.”

“ I think my ‘ other brother,’ as you call Lord Rollamore, must bear that crumple in his rose-leaf.”

Gilbert’s manner was not encouraging. Doctor Sheffield refrained from making further suggestions.

CHAPTER XVII.

MISTAKEN ALL ROUND.

WHEN Florence had first received and grasped the meaning of her lover’s ultimatum, she had been more angry than sorry. There was nothing of the patient Griselda, or long-suffering ass, about Mrs. Maunders’s second daughter. Very properly and proudly she had offered him his release in the days of his honor and prosperity. Very proudly and lovingly had she accepted his refusal to take it. It seemed to her fickle and

unreasonable to the last degree that he should cast her off without a lucid explanation, simply because circumstances had brought him down to her level.

“I cannot give you all my reasons for saying (God knows with what bitterness I say it) that we never can be man and wife. But you must believe that my decision is like my love—unalterable.”

She read and re-read this crushing sentence a hundred times before she could make up her mind how she should reply to it. No one could help her, so she sought counsel of no one. By-and-by she would tell her mother and sister the bare facts, and there would be an end of it, as far as externals went. As for her own inner life—it is useless for any one to attempt to describe what a girl feels and endures “behind the veil,” when the love of her life is murdered.

“If I write, and plead, and protest, he will despise me; if I don’t write at all, he will think me sulky. I’ll write.”

So she wrote in her clear, strong, unwavering hand,—

“I accept and abide by your decision. God bless you.

“FLORENCE MAUNDERS.”

“She didn’t love me as I loved her,” was Gilbert’s comment as he read the note which had cost her such a brave effort to pen. “Or—has she a suspicion of the ghastly truth?”

The fear that she might have this suspicion fretted him for several days until Doctor Sheffield was able to assure him that neither of Mrs. Maunders’s daughters had the faintest glimmer of a doubt about her.

“As a proof of this,” he added, “they both constantly speculate about the mother of the present Lord

Rollamore. They wonder 'who she was,' and 'what became of her' in the most open and ingenuous way."

"Mrs. Maunders listens to her children's speculations?" Gilbert asked, and when Doctor Sheffield replied,—

"She is often present when they are speaking about it, but she has grown very abstracted of late. I'm afraid she's not well," Mr. Kilburn said severely,—

"She has that on her mind which may well make a woman, with any conscience left, abstracted and ill."

"I wish I had never shown you that letter," Doctor Sheffield said, abruptly. "The matter's out of our hands, and beyond our control now. Any attempt to clear up the mystery which surrounds the fate of your father's first wife *might* result in confusion to Mrs. Maunders, and consequently to the whole family, Lord Rollamore and the rest of you Kilburns included, or it might turn out that we have found a mare's nest, and that she is an innocent woman."

"I have no desire to stir still waters, and cast more mud on my father's memory. My life is wrecked. I don't want to pile up the pieces of the wreckage and set fire to them, in order that those who run may read, by the light they make, the story of the Kilburn folly, deception, and shame. In fact, I give it all up, Sheffield. I can't clear my father's name, and I won't cloud it; so I give it all up. I must try and forget my noble birth, and all the traditions by which I've been surrounded from my cradle, and take my place among the lower orders, who are as good men as I am, now that the falsities which have enwrapped me from my birth have been stripped from me."

There was nothing to be said in answer to this by a man who could not help himself, so Gilbert had the exasperating consciousness that he had expended his

shot for nothing. He had really meant it all—meant all the misery and self-abnegation, and intention of renunciation of all good things that pertained to his birthright, and acceptance of the common lot most thoroughly. But when Doctor Sheffield silently took it all for granted, Gilbert wished that he had shown a little more “kick.” “Sheffield’s a fellow who doesn’t understand that there’s more pluck shown in quiescence than fight,” he thought, and down in the depths of disappointment, as he was already, he went into a deeper one still.

If Florence had even thought it worth while to write a line of regret, he would have been better satisfied ; but that she should have let him go free, without a word of appeal against his decision, mortified him. He was a good, true, honorable fellow, but it soured him to think that the girl for whom he had been ready to risk and sacrifice everything in the days of his prosperity should renounce him, or rather let him renounce her, so calmly in the days of his adversity. She was doing exactly what he wanted her to do—abiding by his decision. But if she had rebelled against it a little, he would have been better pleased.

Meantime, Florence was not enjoying herself at all. The poor girl had done nothing which she ought not to have done, and left nothing undone which she ought to have done ; nevertheless, happiness and herself were far apart. That curious factor in our social scheme which we call “they say,” was beginning to oppress her. People, who had no business to do it, asked her in round-about ways “if it was true that they had to offer her congratulations on her engagement to Mr. Kilburn,” or with mournful smiles would press her hand and pathetically bid her “not to despair—there were as good fish in the sea as were yet caught !”

Others would touch the tender spot more cautiously, but with heavier pressure, telling her that "probably Mr. Kilburn found, now that he had turned out to be nobody, that it was needful he should marry money;" adding, "that, of course, she couldn't blame him for what was only common prudence."

To all of these Florence made the same reply. "I am not going to speak about it," she would say very definitely, and in this she did her friends and neighbors a wrong which they found it hard to forgive. If she had blamed him, or excused him, or defended him, they would have had the satisfaction of quoting or misquoting her on the matter. As it was, she brought it to a deadlock, and left that "many-headed monster thing," the Caddleton public, in doubt as to whether she or Mr. Kilburn was the one to blame.

Her mother's manner, too, puzzled and distressed the girl. In the first burst of her bitter disappointment, when she heard from her daughter that "the engagement was at an end," Mrs. Maunders declared herself to be a "rightly punished fool, for having a second time trusted a Kilburn." When Florence asked "who had been the first Kilburn she had trusted, and what she had trusted him with?" her mother answered by doleful shakes of her head, and distressing sobs, which were suggestive of all manner of bygone misery and present remorse. But, beyond this, Florence could gain nothing, so she surmised a series of disagreeable possibilities, which were all far from the facts of the case.

Oddly enough, Doctor Sheffield, whom she had never liked very much after the time he began to fall in love with her, was her greatest comfort and confidant now. He soothed her wounded love and pride by telling her that Gilbert Kilburn had no option in the matter.

“ I am bound, as a man of honor, not to tell you or any one else the reason, Flo, but you must believe me when I tell you that it was one that left Gilbert Kilburn no alternative. Since his father’s death, he found out something which made marriage with you an impossibility.”

“ Does it make marriage with any one else an impossibility ? ”

Unwillingly he answered, “ No.”

“ Then it must be something disgraceful which concerned his father and mine ? ” Florence persisted, and Dr. Sheffield was satisfied to leave her in this belief, rather than let her pursue her researches further, and possibly end by suspecting her mother.

After this, Florence seemed to be drawn nearer in sympathy to her future brother-in-law, and showed such consideration for him, and liking for his companionship, that Kathleen was alternately gratified beyond measure and jealous beyond control. However, as her *trousseau* was in hand, and she was shortly to be married, the fits of jealousy, though excruciating while they lasted, were comparatively brief, and Florence remained comfortably ignorant of her sister ever being attacked by them.

The Rollamores had been established at Parkventon about a month before the half-brothers met. Then Lord Rollamore took the initiative, and called at the river-side cottage on his step-mother.

He had toned down his manner considerably, and shorn himself of many of his affectations since his elevation to the title. Additionally, all that was human and manly in him was touched by the signs of poverty which, in spite of all her children’s efforts and care, surrounded the lady who had been his hostess, environed by all the refinements and luxuries of life when

last he had seen her. His presence was obnoxious to her at first, as being a living token, and reminder of the long, cruel course of deception which her husband had practiced towards her and her children, especially towards Gilbert, whom she idolized. But she was a generous-hearted as well as a just woman, and she permitted herself to take him on his own merits before he had been with her half-an-hour.

There was a want of fine taste and high breeding about him, certainly, and this surprised her in her husband's son ; but she took it for granted that the mother had come across and marred the breed. For instance, it was embarrassing when, in explaining why Lady Rollamore had not accompanied him, he said,—

“The truth is, as you know, my wife is a purse-proud, arrogant, vulgar woman. I dared not risk bringing her into contact with you ; she would infallibly have said something which would have jarred on you and—my sisters.”

His claiming them as “sisters” was presumptuous, of course, but they all forgave him, partly because, by the pause he had made before uttering the two last words, he had shown a proper sense of his presumption, and partly because they were all sensible enough to know that he at least had been guiltless in the matter of his birth and the concealment of his rights. Moreover, life in the Caddleton cottage had tamed them all considerably.

“Feeling that about her, *why* did you marry her, Rollamore ? ”

“My dear Madam, love of the gold that perisheth, but gives one all things pleasant before it does so, led me to propose to marry her. In the end she tricked me.”

Then he told them the story of her suppression of Mr.

Wyndham's news, and showed himself to be so hopelessly wretched in his matrimonial relations, that their hearts warmed to him still more.

It was just as they had reached this hopeful stage that Gilbert came in, and, for a few moments, awkwardness reigned. Again Lord Rollamore took the initiative.

"I hear—I have been told by Doctor Sheffield that you have not fixed on any employment yet, and that you are looking out for some. Will you do a brotherly turn for me, and act as my steward, as you did as our father's?"

He spoke bluntly and abruptly, but they saw that he did this to conceal some real feeling he had about making the proposition to one who had been so far above him when last they had met.

"You must remember that, when I acted as my father's agent and steward, I was acting in my own future interests—at least, I believed that I was—and I took no salary for what I did. Circumstances have altered since then."

"You'll be acting in your own future interests now, for Lady Rollamore will outlive me, and, thank heaven, there'll be no son born of her," Rollamore said, smiling rather weakly; "come into another room, like a good fellow, Gilbert, and let us settle about the salary at once."

Pity for his half-brother, almost as much as for himself, induced Gilbert to accede to his (Rollamore's) request, and presently to his terms.

"I know you're being ridiculously liberal—you wouldn't give any other man seven hundred for managing the Parkventon property."

"Think of Lady Rollamore's hundreds of thousands! By Jove, Gilbert, I'd give up everything I've got and go

back to the life that I've left gladly, if I could only have my freedom again."

As he spoke, he was thinking of poor, pretty, hard-working, honest Valerie Heath, and his face was so sorrowful that Gilbert accepted the situation and salary without further demur.

"After this, the interloper, as they had at first regarded him, became a frequent visitor at the cottage, which quickly altered its aspect, and grew into keeping with their improved circumstances. To his father's widow, Lord Rollamore told all he knew himself of the story of his life.

He had never known his mother, and up to the time of Mr. Wyndham's revelation to him, he had always taken it for granted that she was dead. But now he knew that no definite tidings of her death had ever been received by either his father or the lawyer.

"It's rather a bald way of putting it to a man, to tell him his mother was divorced, and there was an end of her."

"Poor thing, let us hope she has long been at rest, Rollamore," the sympathetic dowager said gently.

But Rollamore shook his head, and said,—

"I should like to know it."

When Gilbert heard of this conversation, his soul ached for the crushing blow that would fall on the girl he loved, if Lord Rollamore carried out his determination to certify himself of either his mother's death, or of her fate if she still lived.

CHAPTER XVIII.

STONY GROUND.

THE wretched pair at Parkventon were finding the bed they had made for themselves thornier each day. In opposition to the usual order of things, it was the woman in this case that suffered least. It is true that she knew that the repugnance her husband had felt for her personally when they married had developed into a loathing and detestation which made the sight of her and the sound of her, and the general sense of her in the house such a ghastly dispensation to him, that he could scarcely live under it. But though she knew this well, she soon ceased to mind it much. She had her title, and she had a certain circle of county people whom she entertained and was entertained by, and who tolerated her on account of her title, and wealth, and foibles, which were amusing when reproduced by clever minxes behind her back.

Besides this, she had another circle in which she had revolved in the Thomas Torrens days, and whom it gladdened her heart to impress and patronize now.

Before Lord Rollamore had established friendly relations with the other Kilburns, his wife had hoped it might annoy him a little if she liberally endowed her daughter May on her marriage with Fergus. But when she found that her husband had held out the olive branch without seeking her co-operation, she set her face against Fergus and the "rest of the beggarly lot," and warned May that if she cast in her lot with them, she would be a beggar, too. The threat had little effect on May.

She knew that her mother's threats and promises were only binding for the minute in which they were made. The old lady's sentiments varied, in fact, with the velocity of youth. Her friends of to-day were, as a rule, her foes to-morrow, and *vice versa*.

There were times, though, when the days seemed very long to the woman who had been promoted to a sphere in which she found nothing familiar to rest upon. With the wealthiest of the wealthy of her own class, she felt wealthy and at ease. But among the patricians, even the poorest of them, the remembrance of her wealth brought her no satisfaction, and she felt that they knew she had secured her title by a most unworthy trick.

Moreover, she always felt out of it conversationally. When any one of the great county ladies did try to draw her into the discussion of any local social subject, her dread of blundering invariably caused her to do so if she responded, and if she did not respond she had the appearance of being sulky. If she evaded entangling her feet in either of these nets, her efforts were ungainly and ridiculous, and she had the extra pang of knowing that they made her more hateful in her husband's eyes than she had been before. The friends of her younger days, whom she delighted to impress and patronize by letter, would have been as much out of place at Parkventon and the neighborhood as she was herself, therefore it was useless to invite them, and yet she did long for the consoling companionship of a contemporary before whom she could feel sure of her footing.

As the widowed Lady Rollamore had made no advances to her successor, that successor felt herself considerably affronted, and declined "to demean herself by going to pride and poverty cottage," as she called

the Kilburns' home. This greatly to her husband's relief, as it ensured him immunity from her society in at least one house in the neighborhood.

Sometimes, when the new Lady Rollamore would be driven by the present dullness to lament over the livelier past, and to regret the home and freedom she had resigned, May would urge her to take the leave of absence her husband would so gladly give her, and go away, either back to the place where she had reigned as a rich, independent widow, or to some new scenes, where she might create new interests for herself.

But Lady Rollamore would not listen to her daughter's advice. Social failure, as she knew herself to be, in the region where such widely different Lady Rollamores had preceded her, she would not voluntarily separate herself from the man and the position she had purchased so dearly. She knew that there is always something dubious about the social status of a woman who lives apart from her husband. Her age would probably have protected her from scandal, but she did not like to think this. If any one had hinted to her that long years had passed since she might have been a snare and temptation to any man to indulge in gay fooling, she would probably have pointed to Lord Rollamore as a living proof that such was not the case. She never could forget that only a few months ago he had sat at her stumpy feet and called her his "goddess," and his "inspiration," and her vanity, which was as colossal as it was ill-founded, refused to grasp the bitter truth, which was that he had only done this from mercenary motives. Accordingly, when May suggested that a home to themselves again, without the crushing presence of Lord Rollamore, would be "a paradise," Lady Rollamore laughed frivoiously, and replied,—

"A hen's paradise, my dear; and even that we should

not be suffered to enjoy undisturbed. People would talk about me if I lived apart from my husband, however blamelessly I lived. They'd be sure to find something to say about me if I even so much as looked at a man, or invited one to the house."

"Really, mamma, I don't think you'd be a mark for slanderous tongues. Your fears are surely groundless?"

"If you mean that my age is a protection, May, you're talking ridiculously. A woman is as old as she looks, and no older, as Rollamore has told me a 'undred times. Now, I know how I look and feel—my glass tells me the one, and my feelin's tell me the other. A pretty thing it would be, after being the honest wife of two men—your poor dear pa was as particular about a woman's reputation as the greatest lord in the land could be—a pretty thing, as I say, 'twould be if I was to have a pack of lies told about me now, and be divorced for nothing. No, no, May; depend upon it, I'm right, whatever you may think. Rollamore was a deal kinder as a lover than he's been as a husband. But I'll hold on to the title and the position I've won for—for your sake."

"I don't think I'm likely to derive much benefit from a residence in Lord Rollamore's, and the constant contemplation of Lord Rollamore's ill-humor; so don't sacrifice yourself on my account, mamma," May said kindly. In spite of the girl's contempt for the folly and vanity which had first led her mother into, and now partially sustained her in, the situation, she could not help pitying and feeling sorry for her.

"She does not care for me much now I am with her, but when I am gone what a miserably lonely old age my poor mother will have!" the girl thought. There was such pathos in the reflection, that unconsciously she infused more sympathy and consideration into her

manner towards the mother who had never striven to develop these qualities in her child. And even in making the effort, May had her reward. The fretting sense of being useless and valueless to her mother left her. She saw soon that Lady Rollamore could better support the idea of being deprived of her title and her husband than of being cut adrift from her daughter.

But even while this more natural state of things was growing up and strengthening, there came a sort of social canker or blight upon the fair plant which checked its growth for a time.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE NEW TENANT AT CAD VILLA.

ONE day, while Gilbert was still eating out his heart in vain regret for the untowardness of the fate which had made him love the daughter of the wife who had dishonored his father, while Florence was trying to work out and silence down the lightest echo of Gilbert's words of love to her, while Lord Rollamore was making fruitless inquiries for the mother who had deserted him, and whose very memory seemed to have decayed out of the world, and while Lady Rollamore was fighting the air in search of some alleviation for the loneliness and friendliness of her exalted position, there came a new excitement into Caddleton's midst.

A fine, flashily-dressed woman, who might have been either thirty-five or fifty-five (at a short distance), got out at the little railway-station, with a local newspaper in her hand. Making her way to the station-master, with much sweeping and swirling of silken garments,

she pointed a well-gloved finger to an advertisement of "Cad Villa" to let, and inquired her way to it.

"Was it within walking distance, or must she have a carriage?" she asked.

The fly-proprietor's wife being the station-master's sister, he at once loyally declared a fly to be necessary. Accordingly, one was procured, and the lady was driven to the genteel villa residence, standing in its own grounds, within easy distance of station, post-office, church, and "trout-fishing," which had apparently caught her fancy.

Apparently, the lady was not very exacting. The house was damp, but "plenty of fires would remedy that evil," she said. The grounds were weedy, and had lost their outline; flower-beds assimilated themselves with lawn; and lawn with paths that led to tumble-down bowers and seats.

"There must be men who can dig and weed for a wage in the place," she said. Then she added, with a harsh laugh, "men, and women, too, will do anything for money, and right they are, too. It's the one friend in the world who never plays you false, or scorns you, or blames you, or fails to give you comfort while you have it."

These sentiments rather staggered the young man from the house-agent's office, who had met her by appointment, but he sniggered faintly, as one who could sympathize with them an' he dare, for the lady's dress was richer than anything that ever saw daylight in the Caddleton streets, and her eyes, and cheeks, and diamonds were as bright as nature and art can make them respectively.

"Is it Lord Rollamore's property? Will he be my landlord if I take it?" she asked, after going the round of the premises, and ordering multitudinous repairs.

“ It belonged to Mrs. Maunders, the doctor’s widow,” she was told.

“ Can I see her ? Does she live near here ? ”

“ The bookseller’s and fancy shop in the High Street is where Mrs. Maunders lives now. She keeps the shop ; but you’ll find her quite the lady to deal with,” she was told.

“ I’ll go and see her at once,” the strange lady said, hailing the driver from the top window at which she was standing at the time. “ Here you ! drive me right away to Mrs. Maunders’s, and then find some hotel where I can have my lunch, I’ll settle it right off, if I can, to-day, and send down furniture at once. I’ve taken a fancy to the hole, and I mean to make it habitable.”

There was something imperious and defiant, and, at the same time, lurkily uncertain about this woman, which made even the agent’s clerk think her peculiar, or “ queer,” he called it. Still, her rich robes and bright eyes, diamonds, and cheeks were almost enough to disarm his suspicions, even had these been less formless than they were.

“ There was quite an air about her,” he stated with some enthusiasm, when questioned about her by an envious colleague. “ She didn’t seem to mind what the price of anything was, but it was just, ‘ this must be done,’ and ‘ that shall be done.’ *She’ve* never known what it is to want for anything she wanted to have. She threw down a half-sov on the table for me, for my trouble in showing her about, like a real lady.”

When her carriage—it was only a dust-begrimed station fly, but she stepped from it with the same air that had impressed the agent’s clerk, and the little street boys remarked that “ the carriage stopped a reer while to Mrs. Maunders’s ”—reached the shop, the lady went

out of it with as much bang as could be achieved by adroit manipulation of the steps and door. Then she went in, and loudly demanded to see Mrs. Maunders, seating herself on one of the cosy sofas as she spoke, and wondering a little what the keeper of such an unusual shop would be like.

While she was wondering, Mrs. Maunders came in, in her usual undemonstrative, sweet, gentlewomanly way, and, bending slightly forward over the table-counter, asked, in the voice which was unroughened, uncoarsened by time : —

“ What can I serve you with ? ”

The lounging woman on the sofa rose up restlessly, and advanced to the counter.

“ I came about the house—Cad Villa they call it. I want to take it.”

Mrs. Maunders's soft dark eyes travelled rapidly over her interlocutor's face, and seemed to fail in finding something there for which she was looking.

“ The house is in the hands of the agent,” she said, softly. “ He has my authorization for doing all repairs that are absolutely needful. It has stood empty a long time, and I am glad indeed to hear that you think of taking it.”

By way of answer the strange lady frowned, put her hand up before her eyes, sighed impatiently, and sat down again.

“ There are one or two things I want to know before I settle down here,” she said. “ Is Lord Rollamore, the new man, of whom no one had heard anything till his father died, a credit to the race and place ? ”

“ He is well spoken of by those who know him. I am neither a tenant nor a workman of his, but those who are say he is kind and just ; and he is much guided by his half-brother, Mr. Kilburn.”

Mrs. Maunders spoke so warmly when she made her mention of Gilbert that her visitor's curiosity was aroused.

"Mr. Kilburn ! that's the son of the second wife, isn't it?"

"Yes ; he who would have been Lord Rollamore—who always was brought up to think he would have been Lord Rollamore. You seem to know something of their story?" she added quickly, as she saw a curious smile play over her visitor's face.

"Oh, only what the public papers have told to the whole world," the latter said, crossly. "When I spoke to my friends about coming down to Caddleton, they naturally, being fashionable folk, told me of Lord Rollamore, who had been so badly used by his father, and about the other Kilburns, who gave themselves such airs."

"They never did that—they couldn't do that ; they're *real* gentlepeople, you see," Mrs. Maunders said, softly. Then something in the stranger's face struck her, and troubled her vaguely. "Do you know—*have* you known any of them?" she asked nervously ; "you seem not to wish the Kilburns well?"

The lady with the bright eyes, and diamonds, and cheeks looked curiously dull behind what was fictitious on her surface.

"It's long since I've wished man, woman, or child well," she said angrily, as she got up again, pulling her veil down hastily, and making for the door. "I settle to take your house, though, Mrs. Maunders, and you'll not find me a mean tenant. I'll do the repairs myself. You're like some one who loved me once, and for that person's sake I'll be liberal to you. In your turn, don't tell any one that I've questioned you about Lord Rollamore."

CHAPTER XX.

MADAME ROCHE SAYS "AH!"

LADY ROLLAMORE, having few social and domestic duties, and absolutely no mental resources whatever, occupied herself a good deal in finding out what was going on in Caddleton. It interested her to hear about the private bickerings and efforts to hunt each other down of the class she did not visit. The tea-table talk of Caddleton filtered (unpurified) through the servants' hall, and was conveyed to her in copious draughts by her maid. Caddleton Villa had not been let to Madame Roche many hours before Lady Rollamore was made acquainted with the fact. The accounts of Madame Roche's aggressively splendid toilet, air, and appearance, greatly exaggerated as they were, dazzled and excited the curiosity of the dull woman at Parkventon. She settled at once in her own mind that the new comer was an interesting foreigner, perhaps a political refugee, with few friends in cold, ungracious Albion. If this should turn out to be the case, Lady Rollamore felt that she might bind the stranger to her heart with iron chains of gratitude by being the first to call upon and hospitably entreat her in the neighborhood.

It chanced, unfortunately, that Lord Rollamore had met Madame Roche in the High Street, and conceived an antipathy to her, before his wife made known her neighborly intention to him. The flashily-dressed, youngish-looking, elderly woman had stared at him with confident, smiling assurance, and he had scowled back at her. Undeterred by his manner, however,

she had afterwards walked up to him, with Doctor Sheffield by her side, and compelled the latter unfortunate gentleman to introduce Lord Rollamore to her. In defiance of his frigid air, she had then asked him to call upon her, telling him at the same time so meaningly that she had "once known a very, *very* old friend of his, that he felt certain he was meeting an acquaintance of his mother's in this woman to whom he had taken so violent a dislike.

Accordingly, his mood was unfavorable to Lady Rollamore's plan of calling upon and cultivating the gorgeous new-comer, and, the more he opposed it, the more Lady Rollamore, who knew she would gain nothing by "studying his whims," as she termed it, determined to carry out her intention. Caddleton Villa would be a delightful place to drop in for afternoon tea with a lively foreign hostess, who would, of course, be only too glad to amuse her.

"She's not a foreigner, and she doesn't look respectable; but, of course, you'll please yourself, only I shouldn't take May if I were in your place; I don't think Fergus would like it."

"May will go where I please, not where Fergus pleases, till she's married. After that he'll be glad enough to please me for the sake of his pocket. They're a mean-spirited set those Kilburns."

"They haven't half a mean idea amongst them, and I wish with all my heart that I were more like those Kilburns," he retorted ill-temperedly.

"You don't call it 'mean' of Gilbert to come crawling back as steward where he expected to reign as lord?" she asked triumphantly; "if you don't, I do; and it's not what I could ever bring myself to do, though I haven't noble blood in my veins."

"I don't suppose for an instant you could bring your-

self to do it. It was a plucky and magnanimous thing to do, and has put me in a much better position here than I should have been in if he had not done it."

As Lady Rollamore did not know what "magnanimous" meant, and was cruelly conscious of her own want of pluck, she was not prepared with a repartee, and the subject was therefore dropped for a time. But that same day she made her first call on Madame Roche, and was astonished and delighted at the thirst for information, concerning Lord Rollamore and herself, which was upon the fine, florid-mannered mistress of Caddleton Villa.

Driving home in the cool of the evening, Lady Rollamore remembered that she had given much more than she had received. Under the clever treatment of Madame Roche, Lady Rollamore had disburdened her mind of its dearest grievances. She had told how, in the days of his being Francis White, with a limited income and limitless tastes, he had woo'd and called her "his goddess." She even told how she had been driven by her deep dread of losing him and the title, to "keep back" the all-important news of the change in his destinies until after the Church had made them one securely. She had spoken with the bitterness of futile hatred of the "other Kilburns, and the influence they were getting over him." So eloquent was she on this point that Madame Roche's eyes flashed with fiery sympathy when the weak old wife told plaintively how fond Lord Rollamore was becoming of his father's widow.

"He treats her with the affection and respect of a son, and consults her about everything, just as if she were his real mother."

"Ah!" said Madame Roche.

"I say it isn't natural or right, whatever his own mother may have been, to want to dignify her position

just as if she were the mother of the present Lord Rollamore. Now what would you feel about it, Madame Roche?"

"I should feel as you do; it is unnatural. He is tame, tame to kiss the rod that chastened his unhappy mother so severely."

"That's just what I tell him," Lady Rollamore spluttered out, with the more energy that she had never told him anything of the kind. "That's just what I tell him. I say, though his own mother was divorced from his father, as we all heard, who can tell how his father drove her to it? My belief always has been that he'd got too fond of the second before he got rid of the first, and that was the reason he laid traps for her to ruin herself in."

"Ah!" said Madame Roche again, and this time she said it with the burr of three or four r's hanging on to the ejaculation, with the sound of a clock spring gone wrong.

"Will this Dowager Lady Rollamore do me the same honor you have done? will she call upon me?" she asked presently.

"I can't tell; they keep very close, and I see nothing of them. My daughter May has thrown herself away by engaging herself to Fergus Kilburn, the youngest son, a mere lieutenant in the Navy, who hasn't had the energy to make the Government make him an Admiral yet. I've no patience with the young man—none whatever; and May such a pretty girl, too, and would have such a fortune if she married to please me."

"Ask your husband to come and see me. I want to talk to him of a good friend of mine who once knew him," Madame Roche, who had not heard one word of her guest's harangue, put in abruptly.

"It's not much use my asking him, Madame Roche;

he's eaten up with selfishness and conceit since he came to the title. You wouldn't know him for the same man he was before; so attentive he was always then, he couldn't bear the wind to blow too roughly on me, and he used to say I was his goddess."

As this was about the fourth time Lady Rollamore had made mention of this interesting fact, it began to pall upon her hostess, whose stock of commiserating sentences was beginning to run low. Accordingly she took refuge in her favorite long-drawn ejaculation, "Ah!" to which no spelling can do justice.

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"She's a horrible old harridan, and I won't go near her," Lord Rollamore said, angrily, when his wife delivered Madame Roche's message.

"She's no older, and you can't say that she is more of a harridan, than that stepmother of yours whom you make so much of," Lady Rollamore said, tauntingly, "I can tell you this, her house is a picture—Turkey carpets on all the floors, and marble images at every corner!"

CHAPTER XXI.

MRS. MAUNDERS GOES FOR A WALK.

CADDLETON was following the good example of larger towns in the matter of having an "early closing" day among other things. Even Maunders's, which had held out to the last, had now followed the prevailing fashion. Since Kathleen's marriage, Mrs. Maunders and the daughter who was left with her found the business of the shop a little more fatiguing than it had been formerly. The opportunity of inaugurating the half-

days of cessation from commercial cark and care was welcomed gladly. Half a day to herself, during the hours of which she was free to sit in the arm-chair in the corner of her bedroom, or walk away into the woods by the river, was a boon which only those who have lived through years of hourly employment, without ceasing, can appreciate.

At any rate, Mrs. Maunders appreciated it thoroughly, and enjoyed her half-holidays as intensely as the hardest-worked shop girl could have done. This special day, with the events of which we are dealing, the arm-chair in the quiet corner in her bedroom, had no charms for her. There was crispness, dry, bright, invigorating, sun-brightened crispness in the atmosphere, and glorious color in the woods, and the close-clipped beech hedges. There was a path by the river that led through the meadow at the end of the widow Lady Rollamore's garden, then winded through a wood, and ended abruptly on a little sparkling beach, where the river joined an arm of the sea.

It was a delightful transition, from the bovine calm of the meadows, where red droons chewed the contemplative cud, to the playful turbulency of the wave-beaten beach. From the woods behind her came the continuous coo of wood-pigeons. From the inlets in the tidal river in front of her, flocks of sea-gulls rose and swirled round and about. A swan floated idly by, contemptuously regardless of the weak efforts to alarm him which were being made by a yapping spaniel on the bank. It was so peaceful and pleasant that Mrs. Maunders wondered why other people did not come out from dreary, dusty Caddleton, and enjoy the vigor and freshness of it all, as she herself was doing ; and even while this thought was in her mind, she saw her new tenant, Madame Roche, advance to the water's

edge, and with voice and gesture urge on the spaniel to worry the swan.

Involuntarily Mrs. Maunders shrank more into the shadow of the bit of over-hanging cliff under which she was sitting. She had not seen her tenant since the day the latter had called and made known her intention of taking Caddleton Villa. Since then, rumors more piquant than pleasant had reached her relative to the lady and her "goings-on," as the rumorists termed it. There had been nothing of a distinctly desperate or criminal order recorded against Madame Roche, but they said that she entertained queer visitors of two distinct stamps. Coarse, rough-handed, bearded, be-diamond-ringed men of the Australian "digger" order, came and caroused at her house, together with neat-gaitered, horsey-looking men, who were probably the outcome of turf interests. "They said," also, that she smoked, and used strong language at times; it was only natural that the local blood should have curdled against her, and that even Mrs. Maunders's milk of human kindness should have turned a trifle sour.

The spaniel continued to yelp, the swan continued to sail placidly up and down, the wood-pigeons cooed, the sea-gulls swirled, and the waves beat upon the sparkling beach, playfully turbulent as before. But the glory had departed from it all for Mrs. Maunders, for the florid stranger had discerned her under the cliff, and had ruthlessly invaded her restful solitude.

"I am fortunate in finding you here," Madame Roche began. "I was just getting tired of playing with Frills when I spied you out. Why do you never come and see me?"

"I very rarely leave home. I am a business woman, you know, and when I can leave my shop, I prefer going for a walk to visiting."

“You aren’t fond of society? It’s foolish for a woman to shut herself up and forswear the pleasures of life before she’s too old to enjoy them.”

Madame Roche was staring hard while saying this at the old doctor’s gentle widow, staring questioningly, perplexedly, almost anxiously, it seemed to Mrs. Maunders, who, becoming embarrassed under the searching gaze, presently rose up, saying,—

“When my husband died, I had to begin to work for my own living and for my children. Society gave me up, naturally. It has no time to make advances to a woman who has no time to respond. Shall we walk along the beach?”

She turned as she spoke, and looked down into the face of the other woman, who was still sitting on a low rock. The latter rose up quickly, muttering inaudibly, coloring through her powder and paint—betraying so much agitation that Mrs. Maunders exclaimed involuntarily,—

“Are you feeling ill?”

“I’m well—quite well! Only you remind me almost painfully of a friend—a relation—whom I *lost* years ago. Would you mind telling me what your maiden name was? Pardon me for being so curious.”

For a second or two Mrs. Maunders hesitated, then she said,—

“I was a Miss White. The name is a very common one.”

Madame Roche drew a deep sighing breath, whether of disappointment or of doubt merging into certainty it was difficult to determine. She walked on silently for a few yards, and then said,—

“Thank you. The name *is* a common one, as you say. The lady you resemble bore it also.”

“And her Christian name was—what was it?” Mrs.

Maunders asked uneasily, and Madame half-closed her eyelids, watching through the narrowed aperture keenly the while, as she replied, with a little harsh laugh,—

“Her name was Florence White—a common name enough, you know.”

“Her name was Florence White, was it?” Mrs. Maunders faltered; and Madame Roche rose, still keenly watching the other woman’s quivering mouth, as she answered,—

“You claim no relationship with my friend? Yet you are strangely like the Florence White I knew—strangely like the girl who once lost her heart to a man called Gilbert Kilburn!”

“Then who are you?” Mrs. Maunders asked, with hardly repressed emotion. “Supposing I *did* know that girl you speak of—*who* are *you*?”

“I am Madame Roche, my dear friend. I am a widow like yourself, only I happen to be rich, and I have a great desire to enjoy life, and see merry faces around me. I want all my neighbors to call and be friendly with me, like that vulgar old Lady Rollamore. Bring your pretty daughter to my house, and come yourself—you who are so like the Florence White I once knew!—and we will enjoy life together, and I will find a rich husband for the pretty daughter—”

“I can’t have my daughter’s fate and future made the subject of idle, frivolous speculation,” Mrs. Maunders interrupted with severity.

“Ah! to be sure, it’s a tender topic. She has been jilted by the young man who has usurped his elder brother’s rights for so long a time—the young man who thought he was to be Lord Rollamore.”

“The fault was not his.”

“No, the fault was the wicked, harsh, vindictive old

brute's who has gone to his account not one day too soon," Madame Roche said, fiercely. "Ah! he has to answer for much. He drove his first wife to sin; he nearly broke another woman's heart. Why are you crying, Mrs. Maunders? Do my reminiscences displease you?"

"For God's mercy's sake, let him rest! If he erred, he was punished through all the long years during which he hugged his miserable secret, and deceived his poor wife and children—"

"His *poor* wife!" Madame Roche raved out, stamping her foot with sudden passion, opening her eyes to their fullest width, and glaring with uncontrollable fury at Mrs. Maunders. "His *poor* wife, you call her? The woman who shared his wealth and position, his pleasures, title, and honor, for more than a quarter of a century. Bah! don't pity *her*! Call that woman 'poor' whom he disgraced and left to perish, whom he robbed of her child—"

"She disgraced him first, God pardon her!—she disgraced him first," Mrs. Maunders sobbed; and Madame Roche glanced contemptuously at her companion as she rejoined,—

"If she has any spirit left, that consideration must be a satisfaction to her. She disgraced her tyrant first."

"You are cruel; I can't listen to you," Mrs. Maunders said spiritedly. "We can never be real friends, Madame Roche—"

"You will alter your tune one day."

"We can never be real friends," Mrs. Maunders repeated firmly.

"You are afraid of me?"

"Perhaps I am."

"The Florence White I once knew was timid."

"Will you tell me who you *were*?" Mrs. Maunders

asked anxiously. I know you are Madame Roche now, but who *were* you ? ”

“That, my friend, you shall know in good time. Meanwhile, I am glad to have discovered that you *were* Florence White.”

They had walked away through the wood and meadow, and were back in the lane leading to the widow Lady Rollamore’s house when the conversation reached this point. As they passed the gate, they saw Lord Rollamore walking slowly down the path, his stepmother leaning on his arm.

“The coward !” Madame Roche muttered ; “see he fawns upon the woman who supplanted his mother.”

“I will say good-bye to you here,” Mrs. Maunders said, wearily ; “our paths separate—I am going to the lower end of the town to see some people who are ill.”

“Our paths will meet, or cross again soon,” said Madame Roche gayly ; “you are churlish, I think, to refuse to be friendly with me, you who remind me so strongly of the Florence White I knew long ago.”

As Mrs. Maunders walked slowly away, her mind was tired, and a tired mind is apt to give the time to the legs—she asked herself, over and over again,—

“Who is she ? She knows me, but did I ever know her ?” and she could not answer these questions.

CHAPTER XXII.

“THE UNEXPECTED” HAPPENS.

“It is the unexpected that always happens,” Lord Rollamore assented gravely. “I’ve never contemplated her death happening before my own for an instant. Poor woman ! I wish with all my heart, I’d never met

her. The end of her life would have been far happier in that case."

"The end of it isn't far off now," Doctor Sheffield said, quietly. He had never liked Lady Rollamore, and he had no pangs of conscience on account of his treatment of her. Consequently he could regard the prospect of her speedy demise with indifference.

"I hope she has taken care of May? She has threatened several times to endow asylums for idiots and cats, and decrepit monkeys, but I hope they were only threats, and that the bulk of her wealth will go to her daughter," Lord Rollamore remarked questioningly.

He knew that Doctor Sheffield had been called upon to witness two codicils to Lady Rollamore's will since he had been in professional attendance on that unfortunate lady. It occurred to him that probably something might have leaked out with regard to the disposition of her property, and for May's sake he was anxious to hear that she had not acted unjustly at the last. "For myself, thank heaven I don't need her money now, nor do I want it," he added, as Doctor Sheffield made no reply, but continued to gaze at him calmly.

"I think Lady Rollamore's will will surprise most people," he said, presently. "I am not able to offer you even a hint of its contents, but—it surprised me when she told me what she had done. Had she lived she would have altered it, I am sure, but she will never recover consciousness now. The last codicil was made out immediately after her last visit to that Madame Roche."

"Ghastly woman!" Lord Rollamore said slowly.

"Meaning Madame Roche?"

"Meaning Madame Roche. I get notes from her two or three times a week, promising me wonderful information concerning myself if I will only call upon

her. I know quite enough about myself. This woman probably only wants to trade upon something she may have learnt relative to my unfortunate mother. She looks to me like a woman who would levy blackmail."

"She certainly affects people unpleasantly. My wife's mother, Mrs. Maunders, seems to me to be under the fascination of terror regarding Madame Roche. Mrs. Maunders loses presence of mind, and becomes frightened and inconsequent directly this stranger comes near her.

As he spoke, the butler opened the door hurriedly to tell the doctor that the "nurses had sent for him;" then, addressing his master, he added, "Madame Roche is in the morning-room. She says it is important that she sees you at once, my lord."

Unwilling, with a barely-suppressed growl at the inopportune nature of this call, Lord Rollamore went to the meeting with the woman whom he had systematically avoided during the past six months of her residence in Caddleton. His antipathy to her was so strong that he felt himself turning pale as he came into her presence.

She, on her part, was higher-colored than usual, under the influence of some strong excitement with which she was evidently battling hardly.

"You have chosen an inopportune time for insisting upon an interview with me, Madame Roche," he began coldly. "Lady Rollamore is dangerously ill—"

"I know that—I know all that," she interrupted tempestuously. "If I had not known that she was dying, if I had not known that at latest, in a few days, at the reading of her will, the truth concerning *us* would be made public, I should not be here now."

"The truth concerning—*us*?" he repeated wonderingly.

“The truth concerning you and me, Lord Rollamore.”

She had come close to him, and now she lifted her hands and placed them on his shoulders, as she bent her face nearer to his. It had been a handsome face once, but it was bloated and lined with the impress of various unrestrained passions and indulgences now, and riddled with paint and powder. It struck no chord in his memory. Nevertheless, he felt himself turning sick with apprehension as he gazed back into the brilliant eyes, out of which the light of purity and womanly dignity had fled long ago.

For a few moments they stood thus, she searching every feature and lineament of his face unblushingly, he looking back at her with such repugnance in his eyes that her gorge rose, and, with a gesture of anger and a grating, false laugh, she pushed him from her.

“First of all, I will tell you some truths concerning your later years, Lord Rollamore,” she began mockingly. “You stooped to lie to and fawn upon that poor dying woman when you thought you would be plain Francis White all your life. And when you found you were Lord Rollamore, you would have cast her off. Oh! I don’t blame you for that! it’s only what might have been expected, by the most shortsighted, of this son of your father! Then you came here and treated the woman you had married for her money so carelessly that she cut you out of her will. Don’t shrug your shoulders—her money may be needful to you yet!”

“With your permission I will close this interview, madame.”

“But without my permission you shall *not* do it, insolent!” she cried, in extreme wrath. “I come here to spare you, to prepare you, to save you from

being confounded by a great surprise, and you treat me as dirt under your *noble* feet. You shall listen to me still, you shall listen till I have told you the story of yourself! And *then* we shall see! Not contented with ruining your prospects with your wife, you insulted the memory of your mother by your open friendship with the woman who succeeded her, who wore the title and held the place which should have been hers!"

"You shall not insult the memory of my mother by pleading so falsely for it," he said, hotly.

Then again she looked at him with her bold, searching, mocking gaze, and again that sense of horrible repulsion stole over him.

"I have not much more to say about the present," she returned haughtily. "You have shown yourself a weak fool throughout, Francis White. You are showing yourself a weak fool now in doing all the honor you can to the widow and family of the late Lord Rollamore, and in slighting and spurning *me*."

He made a step towards the bell, but she intercepted him.

"You would order your servant to show me the door, would you?" she asked, in a fury. Then, as he fell back discomfited vaguely by something in her excited angry face, which was not called forth by the circumstances, she added, "Yet not such a fool as I am. *I*, to expect kindness or common courtesy from one of your father's blood! *I*, to expect justice or humanity from a *man* who thinks he does not *need* me!"

"You rave like a mad woman, and waste time," he said coldly; "if you have anything reasonable to say to me, say it, and go!"

She collected herself, and became unnaturally calm in a moment.

“I raved like a mad woman—did I?” she said, in a low voice; “you’re all alike!—all alike! You madden a woman by your scorn and cruelty, and when she cries out in her pain, you tell her she ‘raves like a mad woman.’ Well, I have this more to say to you. Have you a heart of stone in you that you can’t *feel* that I could tell you of your mother and her fate?”

“Heaven knows I’ve a heart of lead in me, but if you *can* tell me what really became of my mother, you will find me a grateful listener, however painful the recital may be to me.”

“If I told you that your mother was in want and misery, in degradation and hopelessness, what then?”

“God helping me, I’d go to her at once and give her hope again,” he said, eagerly.

“What if I tell you a brighter tale than that, my—my brave lad!” she cried, agitatedly; “what if I tell you that she is well, prosperous—that she can hold up her head in the world, taking no shame to herself for the folly that was forced upon her? What if I tell you that your mother has it in her to help you more than you can help her, that she can make you or mar you, according as you treat her.”

Again she had approached him closely. Again she had put her hands on his shoulders. Again she was peering into his face, with the look that revolted him. He knew now that some terrible revelation—something worse than he ever imagined—was to be made to him.

“My mother is alive, then?” he gasped.

“Alive, well, and hearty, and able and willing to act a mother’s part—to share her fortunes, and (they are large) with you,” she cried hilariously. Then he *knew* what was coming, and, though he shrank back and covered his face, he could not shut out the con-

viction that she was speaking the truth, the painful humiliating truth, when she said,—

“Look at me! Come to me! I have the right to bid you leave those Kilburns—that Lady Rollamore who took my place. I have the *right*, but I ask you, in all affection, to come to me and *own* me.”

“Why? What right?” he gasped out.

“The right that belongs to your mother,” she said, distinctly. “I have forfeited other claims, but never *that*. I am your mother.”

CHAPTER XXIII.

MRS. ROCHE ASSERTS HERSELF.

“Miss TORRENS wants you, my lord, at once.”

It was Lady Rollamore’s own maid who burst in at this moment upon the mother and son, and Lord Rollamore almost blessed the summons as he freed himself from the clasp of the woman who had just announced herself to be his “mother,” and went out in response to May’s call.

May met him at the door of Lady Rollamore’s bedroom. The girl was crying quietly, but her voice was steady and her manner calm. She held her hand out to him in a more friendly spirit than she had ever shown before.

“Don’t go in,” she said, quietly; “it is my fault for not having sent for you before—you are too late to see my dear mother alive.”

“You have never liked me very well, nor have I deserved that you should do so, May,” he said, taking her hand and leading her away to a window-seat at the end of the long corridor; “still, I think you will feel a cer-

tain sort of pity for me now. You have just lost your mother—I have had a heavier blow—I have found mine—found her in Mrs. Roche ! ”

“ It can’t be true—it’s too bad to be true ! ” May said impulsively. Then he told her how he had been claimed as the son of the woman against whom his whole soul had been in revolt from the day he had first seen her.

“ She is in the house now,” he went on ; “ I feel she is telling the truth—I *know* she is my mother. *What* a mother ! If she had been poor, humbled, scorned and shamed, I would have given her comfort, and loved her as a son should ; but she is rich, boastful, arrogant and defiant. She is my mother ; pity me, May, and help me to be kind to her, will you ? ”

All his affectations had taken wing, and left him a thoroughly natural, humiliated man. May’s generous heart responded to his appeal for help in a genuine way.

“ I wish Fergus were here,” she said, simply ; “ he would be such a help to you. As he’s not here, I’ll send for Gilbert. Either of those boys will know exactly what you ought to do, and will help you to do it. They won’t forget that they’re your brothers, you know.”

“ You *are* good,” Lord Rollamore said, gratefully. “ I suppose I ought to ask her to come here ? I want to do what is natural and right ; must I ask her here, May ? ”

“ Gilbert shall come and help you. Lord Rollamore, I am sure you will do what is right about your mother, but still Gilbert and Fergus are your brothers, and they’ll help to make ‘ right ’ easier for you than it will seem if you are alone. Your mother, Mrs. Roche, won’t think I ought to go to her now ? I would do anything to help you, but she won’t expect me *now*.”

The girl had been speaking steadily up to this point. Now she broke down.

“ Poor mamma ! ” she sobbed. “ I want to go away and think of her as she was when I was a little girl, before my father died. I’ll write to Gilbert, though, and tell him to come to you,” she added reassuringly, and then she went away, and Lord Rollamore was alone once more in a sea of doubt.

He dreaded returning again to the woman who had avowed herself to be his mother ; and he dreaded even more leaving her to her own devices in his house till checked by his presence. That she was daring and defiant he had discovered. That she might prove vindictive unless she were very cautiously dealt with, he feared. That there was much in her career which it would be well to conceal from the censorious eyes of society, he felt convinced. At the same time, if she was his mother, he would never fail in respect towards her himself, and would strive to enforce it from others.

How his heart yearned now towards his good, gentle, kindly, high-bred stepmother. How gladly he would have resigned the elder sonship and title to have the younger Kilburns’ proud right to call *her* “ mother ” ! Every step of his social and domestic life would be encompassed with difficulties if this person who called herself “ Madame Roche,” and claimed him as her son, insisted upon remaining near him and clogging his career. If it had not been for her, what a vista of possible happiness was opened to him by his wife’s unexpected death ! He was free to go to Valerie Heath, in honor now, ready to fight any social battle on her behalf if people were disposed to look askance at his wife. But, hampered by such a mother, the fight would be a terribly unequal one. “ Her friendship, if she gave it, would be detrimental to poor Valerie,” he thought gloomily, and he was just thinking that at least he would never live under the same roof with Mrs. Roche,

when the housekeeper came to him flurried and in undignified haste.

“I am sorry to disturb your lordship,” she began, her voice quivering with suppressed indignation, “but I’ve had the most extraordinary orders, and I must hear from you whether I’m to obey them or not.”

“What are they, Mrs. Jennings?” he asked impatiently.

“The person who lives at Caddleton Villa has given orders to have a suite of rooms prepared for her here at once. She sent for me, and, when I hesitated, she stamped her foot at me, and said, ‘I should soon know who was mistress here,’ and that ‘Lord Rollamore wouldn’t dare to countermand her orders! It can’t be, my lord, that you will allow such a person to come and rule here, though my late lady *did* take up with her?’”

Lord Rollamore almost groaned. The story, in all its ugly nakedness, must soon be known to all men, he knew, but he shrank from being the one to tell it to his own household.

“I think you had better do as Mrs. Roche desires,” he said feebly. “As you say, she was a great friend of your late mistress; and I should like—I should wish that every attention is paid to her—her orders.”

“His lordship must be dotty,” was the verdict on this extraordinary conduct in the servants’ hall. He had let one old woman, whom he didn’t like, marry him; and now he was allowing another, whom he had seemed to hate, to come and take possession of his house. Very grudgingly indeed did Mrs. Jennings give orders for the preparation of a boudoir, bedroom, and dressing-room in the east wing for the reception of “that Madame Roche.” When they were prepared, Madame Roche wouldn’t occupy them.

“I must have the rooms in the south front—the ones that were newly furnished when the late Lord Rollamore brought his family down the last time,” she said authoritatively. “I have heard about them from my poor friend who is lying dead upstairs. They are the handsomest rooms in the house, and they shall be mine—mine as soon as I choose, and for as long as I choose—and, if Lord Rollamore objects, I will see him and remove his objection !”

He groaned again when he heard this, but still, as she had refrained from proclaiming herself to his servants, he offered no opposition to her autocratic will. It would be time enough to combat that when the worst was known. While the worst could be concealed, her most exasperating caprices should remain undisputed.

So that day passed. Gilbert had not replied to May's summons, the fact being that he was away at Kingsbridge for a few days on Lord Rollamore's business. An exorbitant rent had been offered by an enterprising returned colonial for a piece of land at Salcombe, which had belonged to the Kilburns for generations. Waste land it had been up to the present time, but the colonial saw in it unbounded possibilities when he should have erected that mammoth hotel and boarding-house, which would dwarf every other building of the kind in the west country.

At the dreary eight o'clock dinner that night, May did not make her appearance, but, to his horror, Mrs. Roche did, clad quite neatly in trailing garments of the most sombre shades of black silk.

“I shall have proper mourning for my daughter-in-law down from Jay's in a day or two : in the meantime, you'll excuse there being no crape about this, won't you ?” she whispered to her son, who turned faint and

sick as he marked the effect the whisper had on his servants.

It was a miserable meal. Her policy was to force him to declare the relationship between them, and this he was fixedly resolved not to do until he had seen Gilbert, and drawn out with him a plan of his future course of proceedings with regard to his relations with his mother. Meantime, though scrupulously polite to her, he held aloof from all her demonstrations of affection, and managed, by dint of preserving a stony silence, to check her garrulity during dinner.

But, as soon as the servants had left the room, she forced him from his stronghold of quietude by saying,—

“How long is this ridiculous state of things to last, Rollamore? I have been patient for years, but now—now that *you* my *son*, are in possession of your birth-right, I look to you to acknowledge and defend the position of your mother.”

He could not tell her in so many words that she had forfeited that position years ago, when he was an infant. But he remembered it, and she saw that he did so, and was infuriated accordingly.

“Is it for you—*you*, my own child, to cast my—my follies in my teeth?” she asked intemperately. “I was not a worm. I would not be crushed by Gilbert Kilburn. He was not Lord Rollamore in those days, but I took care that *you* should be. I regarded your interests; there was never a doubt in the lawyer’s mind that *you* were the heir, and not this young Gilbert Kilburn, whom I hate. I took care of *you*, ah, I took care of *your* interests.”

“The law would have taken care of them,” he muttered.

“The law! *that* for the law.” She snapped her fingers and laughed odiously. “Some day I may tell

you all I did for you, but not now—not yet. I kept my eye on you always. I have known many changes since Gilbert Kilburn drove me from my place.”

She bowed her head down into her hands, and wept stormily for a few moments; then she pulled herself up into an aggressively erect position, and recommenced.

“There are some things you shall know about me, whether the hearing them is pleasant to you or not.”

“Spare me yet awhile,” he murmured; “the whole surprise has been sprung upon me so suddenly—”

“That your aristocratic nerves can’t stand it? *You*, Lord Rollamore, have no real pluck in you. The descendant of a hundred barons, you’re as great a coward as if you had been the son of a low-bred loafer and scoundrel.”

“You ought to make allowances for my deficiencies,” he said wearily, smiling faintly. “I had not many advantages in my youth, remember. Cast off and deserted as I was by both my parents, you mustn’t be surprised if I fail in the attributes and traditions of my race.”

She gave him a quick, startled glance.

“I hate to hear you volunteering for the lower place. What makes you do it?” she asked quickly.

“Did I volunteer for a lower place? I am unconscious of having done so.”

“You did. You spoke of your deficiencies.”

“You yourself had just accused me of want of pluck,” he interrupted quietly, “and you were good enough to add that, for all I showed to the contrary, I might be the son of a lowbred loafer and scoundrel. After hearing such a description of myself from ‘my mother,’ what wonder if I take a ‘lower place?’ I will go to the drawing-room. You will not find Miss

Torrens there to-night. You will excuse her?" he asked hastily.

"Certainly I will. I am at home, remember, Rollamore," she answered, smiling artificially as she passed him at the door. "In my son's house I am at home?"

She put it in the form of a question, and he answered in the same spirit.

"You have the right to feel at home in your son's house—a right which I shall always respect. But we, both of us, seem out of place here."

She wheeled round sharply as she was passing out of the room, and put her hand on his shoulder, fastening her eager, piercing eyes keenly on his the while.

"You are a better man than your father was," she said, with a sob. Then she almost ran from the room, trailing her heavy skirts along after her with the sound of a great rustling, as of an autumnal vengeance.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"SILENCE WAS CRUEL."

MRS. MAUNDERS and Florence were spending what was called in Caddleton "a nice, quiet evening" with Mrs. Sheffield. It was the married daughter's greatest social delight to get her own nearest kith and kin to spend several hours in her thoroughly comfortable, handsomely-furnished house whenever she was what she pathetically called "all alone of an evening;" that is, whenever the doctor had one of his frequent summons to go several miles into the country to attend a patient whose illness might detain him indefinitely for a longer period than his wife cared to spend alone.

The three ladies had dined cosily together, and had

got themselves back into the drawing-room, with the lamp between them, and their chairs drawn into pleasant proximity to the fire. The whole aspect of the room was cheery and inspiring. Doctor Sheffield had allowed it to remain empty until he married, and then he had given his young bride free permission to furnish it as she pleased, within the limits of a certain liberal sum which he named. Kathleen had shown herself quite deserving of the trust which he had reposed in her. She had not gone headlong into a furnishing establishment and ordered a roomful of monotonously correct articles; but she had exercised taste and judgment, research and discrimination, in the selection of the household goods. The result was harmonious to a degree that gagged criticism, even from the conventional, to a certain extent.

These evenings with her married daughter were among the greatest pleasures of Mrs. Maunders's quiet life. She did not belong to that order of mother-in-law which delights in asserting its right to be "at home" in a son-in-law's house. Still, though she did not do this in thought, word, or deed, she had a very comfortable feeling of being thoroughly at ease whenever she passed Doctor Sheffield's portals. He treated her invariably with even a greater amount of deferential attention than she received from her own daughter, it seemed sometimes. This, though it gratified her, also puzzled her at times. It was as though he felt that she required extra gentle treatment for some reason or other. Not being an invalid, and not having any crime on her conscience, the extra gentleness shown to her, though extremely welcome, was a trifle perplexing.

"Ned is so sorry he can't be at home to-night, as you're here, mother dear," Mrs. Sheffield had said more than once during dinner, and now that they had settled

to their evening's work and chat over the fire in the drawing-room, she repeated her remark.

“Is he over at Parkventon still?” Florence asked.

It was the evening of the day on which Lady Rollamore had died, and all Caddleton was busy canvassing the event.

“I think not,” his wife replied; “he came away when it was all over, you know; but then his other patients had to be attended to—his usual morning round done in the afternoon, you see. Poor Ned! he'll not have any dinner till between ten and eleven o'clock.”

“I wonder he doesn't get indigestion,” Florence remarked. “He can't, though, for his complexion keeps so white, and pink, and nice.”

“I'm sure it doesn't,” his wife replied indignantly. “Flo speaks as if Ned looks like a barber's block, and he doesn't a bit, does he, mamma?”

“I should never say that a barber's block looked ‘nice,’ and I do think your Ned one of the very best-looking men I ever saw, Kathleen, so please don't quarrel with my idle words,” Florence said, laughingly. “The fact is, the words were *very* idle, for I was thinking all the time of Lord Rollamore, and of what he will do now that poor wife of his is dead.”

Mrs. Maunders stopped knitting, and tapped her chin thoughtfully with one needle as she listened to her married daughter's reply.

“I didn't get much information from Ned when he came back from Parkventon. I asked him if Lord Rollamore seemed cut up at all by his wife's death, and he said, ‘No, why should he be?’ Men *pretend* to be heartless; you know, sometimes, mother.”

“Probably Doctor Sheffield meant what he said; it would have been rather unnatural if Lord Rollamore

had been 'cut up' by his wife's death, considering what that wife was," Florence interposed.

"Is any one with poor Miss Torrens, I wonder?" Mrs. Maunders questioned sympathetically.

"You'll be surprised to hear who is there—not with Miss Torrens, but as a sort of familiar family friend. Try to guess, mother. Who should *you* think, Flo?"

"Old Lady Rollamore, probably," Florence suggested. "She's like all the rest of the Kilburns, goodness and kindness itself."

"Not Lady Rollamore," Mrs. Sheffield replied, shaking her head triumphantly. "But you'll never guess—how should you? When Ned told me, I said it couldn't be—it *couldn't*, you know. But he said he heard her giving orders to the housekeeper about having a suite of rooms arranged for her. *Such* a thing, isn't it? There must be something *very* odd, mustn't there?"

"You've forgotten that you haven't told us who the astounding guest is," Florence said, remindingly.

"Well, I'll tell you, because mamma and you might go on guessing from now till midnight, and you'd never hit on the right person. It does seem as if there was to be no end to the mysteries in the Kilburn family. I'm sure, when poor Gilbert was turned out of his inheritance by this new man, I thought I could never feel surprised again about anything. Didn't you, Flo? Oh, I forgot! I didn't mean to hurt you by referring to *him*, Flo dear, you know *that*. But this last surprise is too astounding altogether, now, isn't it?"

"Will you remember that you haven't told us yet who the untoward guest is?" Florence asked, with good-humored, exaggerated patience. "Mother and I are longing to be surprised and mystified—aren't we, mother?"

“ Well, mamma,” Kathleen resumed eagerly, “ what will you say when I tell you it’s your own tenant at the villa—that flashy, bold-looking ‘ Madame ’ Roche, as she calls herself—”

The knitting dropped from Mrs. Maunders’s helpless, trembling hands.

“ *That* woman at Parkventon, now that Lady Rollamore is dead ? ” she faltered out.

Kathleen nodded assentingly.

“ I thought—that is, I’ve heard it gossipped—that Lord Rollamore would never know her, in spite of his wife’s intimacy with her ? ”

“ No more he would,” Mrs. Sheffield explained, with the proud air of one in possession of fuller knowledge than her audience. “ No more he would ! but now she evidently means to establish herself at Parkventon, for Ned heard her giving orders about her rooms ! I asked Ned what it all meant ; and he only shook his head, and told me stranger things than have happened yet may happen soon.”

“ Ned is rather given to shaking his head and being oracular,” Florence was remarking smilingly, when the attention of both girls was attracted to their mother. Mrs. Maunders had turned her face to the back of the high chair in which she was seated, and concealed it with her hands, but they saw that her whole frame was shaken with sobs.

“ Mother ! mother dearest ! *what* is it ? ” they cried in alarm, and at length she told them.

“ I have dreaded that woman ever since she came into the place, not knowing whom she was. *Now* I know—I feel whom she is, and I dread her still more. Poor Lord Rollamore ! He had better have remained obscure Francis White all his life, for Madame Roche is—”

The words that were almost on her lips died away on her tongue unspoken. She had faced round to her daughters as she was speaking the last words, but it was not at them she was looking. The door had opened, and Doctor Sheffield had come into the room.

"Hush!" he was saying, holding up a silence-commanding hand. "Not a word more, dear Mrs. Maunders. Leave Madame Roche to fight her own battles, and tell her own story. Kathleen, dear, can I have a basin of soup? I'm sent for by Mrs. Ruther at Glass-hill farm, and she means business till to-morrow morning, I fancy. Lord Rollamore has sent for Mr. Kilburn," he went on, addressing Florence casually. "Mr. Kilburn will be his best friend and adviser in some untoward circumstances that may arise."

Florence flushed with pleasure at the implied praises of the man she loved.

"Is Lord Rollamore in any difficulty? You speak as if he had some other trouble hanging over him besides the death of his wife."

"To be quite candid, that last is not much of a trouble; there are worse things coming for him, I'm afraid." Saying which, with another grave shake of his head, which might portend anything or nothing, Doctor Sheffield got himself out of the room without betraying that he knew little more of the nature of the breakers ahead of Lord Rollamore than they did themselves.

"I'll go and see that he has his soup comfortably," Kathleen whispered hurriedly, as she fled after him.

Then Florence turned to her mother, and took her hand with a strong, comforting hand-clasp that was worth any amount of emotional wordy sympathy.

"Dear mother," she said kindly, "I have often felt that you had something to worry you that you wanted to keep from us, because you wouldn't have us worried

too. But I can bear anything *with* you, mother dear, indeed I can ! Will you tell me why this woman, who calls herself Madame Roche, distresses you ? ”

“ She is the dead come to life again, Florence,” Mrs. Maunders said brokenly. “ Before you were born—before I ever saw your father—I believed *she* was dead—”

“ Who is she ? ”

“ The late Lord Rollamore’s first wife—the mother of the present Lord Rollamore ! Florence, it was awful to me to fear it—to dread it in doubt—as I did that day I met her down by the river ! But it’s more awful still to have the conviction forced upon me that it’s true, as I have, now I hear she has forced herself into Parkventon.”

“ Lord Rollamore’s mother ! ” Florence said meditatively. “ She is not a good woman, then, mother ? ”

“ She was weak, weak—more than wicked,” Mrs. Maunders faltered. “ She sinned against her husband and her son, and I believed, till lately, that she had expiated her offence in sorrow and suffering, and by death. But I have been deceived by her, as others had been before me.”

“ She must be wicked rather than weak to have deceived you,” Florence said, hotly. “ What was she to you ? Why should you care about her ? Why should her weakness or wickedness affect or distress you, mother ? ”

“ She is my cousin—we were girls together. I was so proud of her when we were young ! I was the only one in the secret when she married Gilbert Kilburn. I was the one to take charge of her little boy when she left him.”

“ You took charge of her boy—of the one who is Lord Rollamore now ? Where was his father ? Were

you friendly with his father, or did you take the child from him? Oh, mother, it is interesting! Your being mixed up with the Rollamore romance is too extraordinary a thing altogether for me to quite grasp it yet. Did you know the old Lord Rollamore well?"

"*Too* well!" Mrs. Maunders sighed faintly.

"Then all the time that Gilbert Kilburn—my Gilbert—was being passed off as the heir, you must have known better?"

"The secret burdened my otherwise happy life, Florence."

"Oh, you should have told him; you should have warned him! how could you let such a secret be kept from him all those years, poor boy, when a word from you might have spared him such a blow as that which fell upon him when his father died? You should have told him, mother, silence was cruel."

"I was bound to silence, Florence. I can't tell you, I can never make you understand what strong pressure was put upon me. Besides, I wanted to forget, my child, even if I hadn't been bound to silence and secrecy, I wanted to forget—I prayed to be allowed to forget."

Her voice had got very low, and she seemed as if she were speaking to herself.

"A ghost from the past is haunting her," Florence thought. "If she would trust me, and let me help her to lay it, how much happier we should be."

CHAPTER XXV.

A PARTIAL REVELATION.

THE woman who carried herself with such coarse defiance in the presence of others—especially of that other whom she claimed as her son—deported herself very differently when she was alone.

At night, when she took off her bright hair and complexion, removed the dark shadows from under her eyes, and the pearly teeth from their place, behind the lips that laid by their rosiness until the morrow; at night, when she did all these things, she subsided at once into a care-worn, shaky old woman. Deprived of these artificial aids to self-confidence, Mrs. Roche collapsed supinely. Her form, when taken out of her well-padded and shaped corset, was seen at once to have lost all its rounded proportions and graceful curves. Her head was nearly bald. There were deep wrinkles on her forehead, and round her toothless mouth. Her eyes looked out blearily from their red-rimmed sockets. The very voice of the woman changed! She mouthed and mumbled, and the efforts of the day revenged themselves upon her, now that the day was over, and the necessity for making the efforts done with, by leaving her nerveless, uncertain in movement, and almost incapable of continuous thought.

She had secured those rooms in the south front which had been refurnished by the late Lord Rollamore for his wife on the occasion of their coming home to live at Parkventon, and make that “spirt” which he had hoped would result in wealthy marriages for his sons. At the

cost of a bitter contest with Mrs. Jennings, the house-keeper, she had secured these rooms, and now she was not happy in them. Twice or thrice she had sent messages to her son Lord Rollamore, demanding his presence, and each time he had sent back an excuse. There was something she had to tell him which was beginning to frighten her. To frighten her in spite of her knowing that none other than herself was in the secret, consequently, that none other than herself could ever tell him the truth. Still, though she was afraid of what he might say and do in his wrath when he heard it, she determined on revealing it to him. So, once more, on the eve of the funeral of the late Lady Rollamore, Mrs. Roche sent once again for her son.

She never committed herself to a verbal message, but always carefully wrote and sealed her notes. This night she wrote:—

“MY DEAR SON,—For very dear you are to me, though you hold me at arm’s-length. Come to my rooms this evening. I have that to tell you which for your own sake you ought to hear before your wife’s will is read to-morrow, in order that you may not, when you hear it, act intemperately and ruin yourself. My one thought is for your aggrandizement and honor. For these I have striven from the day of your birth. For these I obliterated myself, and deprived myself of the joy the sight of you would have been to me all these years. For these I ‘sinned,’ maybe, at any rate I suffered. Let nothing keep you from me this night.

“YOUR AFFECTIONATE MOTHER.”

“Bring back Lord Rollamore’s answer to me at once—at once,” she said imperatively to the servant to whom

she gave her note. She had dined in her own room, for the nervous strain she had endured while coming to the determination to bare her story to her son, had unfitted her for the effort it would have been to sit at the table and exchange commonplaces with him and May. She had dressed herself well and carefully for the interview she was seeking. But she had taken off the rouge and washed out the eye-shadows, and thrown some black lace over the bright hair, which looked so uncomely on her old head.

She waited anxiously, heart-sickeningly, for half-an-hour, sitting well in the lamp-light, resolving to let him see at once how old, and worn-out, and faded she was with life's struggles and conscience's pricks. Then she heard a step outside her door, and her heart stood still with the thought that she was on the brink of making the most momentous revelation of her life.

It was only the servant come back to tell her that "his lordship was engaged with his brother, Mr. Kilburn, and had left orders that he was not to be disturbed."

She quivered with fury as she listened to the message, listened in silence and with an averted head, for she did not wish the servant to see the ravages her compunction had made upon her eyes and complexion. When she was alone again, she rose and staggered over to the glass, and looked at herself ruthlessly.

"Ah!" she shuddered, "I shall never be able to do it again! I look too hideous. To-night I would have shown him the truth. It is his own fault that he won't see it and hear it—fool that he is! After to-night it will be too late to do him any good, but he prefers the society of his 'brother, Mr. Kilburn!' His brother! I could laugh at the sneakish idiotcy of it all—if I were not more inclined to cry. His 'brother, Mr. Kilburn!'

He prefers his 'brother, Mr. Kilburn,' the son of the woman who stepped into my place, and enjoyed the wealth, and rank, and consideration that should have been mine; he prefers the son of this woman to his mother! Ungrateful, cowardly sneak that he is, after all I have done for him. I will crush him with the truth by letting the world hear it, instead of breathing it to him, and him only, as I would have done to-night. He is unnatural! he hates and shrinks from his mother—from the mother who made him what he is."

She was wringing her hands and crying violently as she muttered out her sentences of wrath. Suddenly she calmed herself, wiped the tears and their traces from her face, then placed candles on her dressing-table, and for an hour devoted herself to the art of make up. Then she dressed herself in black velvet, and a long sable cloak, and when she had arranged a veil with girlish tightness and precision over her face, she rang and ordered the brougham to be got ready for her at once.

In twenty minutes she was being driven rapidly towards Caddleton, having given the brief order "Maunders" when she was stepping into the little carriage.

Mrs. Maunders was alone when her unexpected and singularly unwelcome visitor arrived. Florence was out at her sister's house. Mercifully, Florence was out!

Mrs. Maunders, rising from her seat by the fire in the little sitting-room behind the shop, stayed her hand on the back of her chair in a vain effort to steady herself. Her sweet, gentle face was sadly agitated. Her eyes, with something of recognition and more of fear in them, were fixed inquiringly on the striking-looking incomer. Her impulse was to run out of the room—away from the indefinable danger and mortification which encompassed her like an atmosphere whenever she found herself in

Madame Roche's presence. This night that atmosphere was intensified by the knowledge she had gained from Doctor Sheffield of Madame Roche's real personality. Subduing her impulse as her unwelcome guest approached her, she forced herself to speak.

"Why have you come? Oh! *why* have you come?" she asked brokenly.

"Why have I come? to make known my rights, and to claim them," the other woman said undauntedly. "Come, Florence, cease this nonsensical evasion of me. You know who I am as well as I know who you are, my dear, timid old cousin, 'timid' now in your maturity as you were when you were a slip of a girl. But, timid as you were then, you were fond of me, Florence. You never stood aloof from me then."

She held out her arms as she spoke, and Mrs. Maunders moved slowly forward, and let herself be embraced.

"Forgive me if I seem cold," she said chokingly. "Remember how your appearance has upset the belief of years."

Madame Roche pushed her cousin from her, and shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

"The belief of years, namely, that I was dead and had ceased from troubling, seems to have been a mighty pleasant one, Florence. You evidently like having it upset as little as my son does. He has not given his mother too warm a welcome, I assure you. There has been nothing in it that you need envy me."

"You are staying with—with Lord Rollamore; he admits that you *are* his mother?"

"He has conceded that point, my dear, because he can't help himself. I bring my credentials with me in the shape of papers that I have kept in many lands through wild wanderings. Besides, you can bear testimony to

the justice of my claims. You know that I was the late Lord Rollamore's wife? You rather grudged me the felicity of being Mrs. Gilbert Kilburn, if I remember rightly, for you had a pardonable weakness for the gentleman himself. I used to expect to hear that he had married you when he rid himself of me, but it seems he married a lady of high degree, with money, which has since vanished! So *she* has been punished for taking my place."

"Have you come to tell me what you have been doing all these years?" Mrs. Maunders asked unwillingly.

"Your matronly ears would tingle if I told you the tale," the other woman answered harshly. "Why should I tell you of my past? It has been full of ups and downs, but at last I have conquered fortune before fate has been able to conquer me. I am a rich woman; I shall be a much richer one, for—now you'll be surprised—my son's wife has left all her money to *me* unconditionally."

"To you?"

"Even so! The will, which will be read after the funeral to-morrow, will astound every one. I won her heart and soul by sympathizing with her rage against the people, those Kilburns, who slighted her, and made much of her husband. I flattered her foibles, I planned her revenges, she lived long enough for my purpose, quite long enough, for the codicil which makes me inherit everything of hers would have been revoked probably in a day or two, if her husband had happened to please her. As it is, I come in for all her money, and this will give me enormous power over my son. If he sets himself in opposition to me, and still clings to those Kilburns, he will have a great fall, he will have such a fall as will break him to pieces."

"You talk like a mad woman," Mrs. Maunders said nervously.

"You shall not hint that I am mad!" Madame Roche cried furiously. "You shall not dare to suggest it. Was there any madness, do you think, in the method of my management of that poor old woman who is just dead? Has there been madness in the self-control which has enabled me to efface myself to bide my time until I could insist on my son restoring me to that place from which my husband ousted me?"

"You are still impenitent. You still dwell more on his punishment than on your own sin."

"And you still take his part, though he is dead now, and can never reward your young, affectionate loyalty," Madame Roche sneered. "You were always a fool, Florence; time has not strengthened your character. I remarked that the day I terrified you so by the river. But, weak or strong, I claim you for my ally now. You shall tell every one you know, and every one who speaks to you about me, that I am the genuine Madame Simon Pure, the real first wife of the late Lord Rollamore, the true mother of the present one."

"I will say that, if I am called upon to say anything, *that* at least is true," Mrs. Maunders said, quietly; then she added hastily, "go now, I hear my daughter coming in. I am not prepared to explain matters to her to-night."

"I know you are afraid I shall say something unfit for her ears. No, Florence, I'm not so reckless or so cruel as to do that. Show me that you trust me. Tell your daughter now, to-night, that I am your cousin, and that we loved one another as sisters once."

"There will be so much else to tell in order to make the matter clear to her. Spare me the task to-night," Mrs. Maunders pleaded,

“I choose to be acknowledged as your cousin, and introduced to her as Lord Rollamore’s mother to-night. I want my rights to be known. I long to have my position established. Think how long I have been defrauded of my rights ; think of how I have drifted about without any recognized position, and please me in this little matter to-night.”

“The child will be so surprised. She is so unprepared for such a revelation.”

“She is not a reed, to be shaken by every little wind like her mother. Your daughter looks a strong, capable girl.”

“Is Roche your *real* name ?” Mrs. Maunders asked hesitatingly.

“Do you mean, am I married to a man who bears that name ?”

“That is what I meant.”

“Then I can assuage your delicate alarms, my dear. To my sorrow I am married to Mr. Roche.”

“Is he alive ?”

“To my greater sorrow he is,” Madame Roche said bitterly, “and to my greatest sorrow of all he intends coming down and taking up his residence at Caddleton. We shall be a happy family when that event takes place, for I hate him as much as my son seems to hate me.”

“He is not a—a good man, then, I’m afraid ?”

“He is the greatest hypocrite that God ever permitted to cumber the earth,” Madame Roche burst forth ; “good ! no good man would have married me, but I did not, with all my faults, deserve to be linked to such a man as Mr. Roche. Ah ! but he is plausible. He will come here, and the people who turn up their noses at me will accept him and think well of him, and in return he will—”

“What will he do?” Mrs. Maunders asked, as her cousin paused abruptly.

“I dare not say. He always seems to hear what is said of him sooner or later. So! *this* is your daughter! My cousin, how I envy you such a child.”

She moved swiftly towards Florence as she spoke, and made as though she would have embraced the erect young figure, that was so distinctly repellant in its attitude. On second thoughts, however, she deemed it advisable merely to extend her hand with well-expressed heartiness.

“Did I hear you call my mother ‘cousin’?” the girl asked collectedly.

“You did. Do you object to the relationship, young lady?”

“Not at all, as I know nothing about you, Madame Roche,” Florence answered, meeting Madame Roche’s angry glances unflinchingly; “only I have heard already that you are Lord Rollamore’s mother, and that you should also be related to us comes upon me as a surprise.”

“Not too pleasant a one, it seems?”

“Not too pleasant a one.”

“You had better make friends with me, my daring young lady. Think, my son is a free man now, and he is Lord Rollamore; secure my good offices for yourself with him, and give up wasting yourself in dreaming of Gilbert Kilburn—who pitied you.”

“You are very coarse, Madame Roche,” was all Florence said, as she turned and left the room.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE SHADOW OF MR. ROCHE.

GILBERT KILBURN'S first feeling when he heard of the affliction that had befallen Lord Rollamore was one of joyful relief. His second was of absolute contrition when he remembered how grievously and on what insufficient evidence he had condemned Mrs. Maunders and spoilt Florence's life as well as his own for a time.

After his first ejaculation of wonder and relief, he let his half-brother go on uninterruptedly to the end of what was palpably a gruesome story for him to tell.

"It was bad enough when I believed that Madame Roche was merely a time serving, manœuvring hanger on of my poor wife's. But to find that she is my mother, to think that she will be within her rights in asking for a home in my house ! Gilbert, will you see her for me ? Will you put it to her that, if she has any natural feeling, she will understand that it is impossible I can take up the *rôle* of her son ? Our relations must inevitably always be of the most strained and unpleasant description if she persists in fixing herself down here to live. If she does, I declare I'll give up Parkventon and go to Central Africa or Iceland, or anywhere out of her reach. She's appalling to me, simply appalling ! She paints an inch thick on her cheeks and lips, and her eyes make me shudder. It will half break my heart to leave Parkventon and part with you, old boy, but, if she stays, I can't."

“ I’ll see what I can do to-morrow. In time, if she is patient and sensible, your mother and you may come together to the greater happiness of you both, old fellow. After all, you’re bound to remember that she is your mother, under all circumstances.”

Gilbert tried to speak reassuringly and cheerfully. The fact is, it was easy for him to do so. The relief he felt in finding that Mrs. Maunders was above suspicion and beyond reproach as regarded her relations with his father quite overbalanced any sensation of sympathetic chagrin which he might have felt for his half-brother in the discovery the latter had made that Madame Roche was his mother.

“ It wouldn’t be quite so bad if she hadn’t come down here and called herself ‘ Madame’ Roche. Why ‘ Madame ?’ And who is Roche, I wonder ? Gilbert, it’s an awful thing to be afraid to ask your own mother how she came by the name she sails under, and who the fellow is who bestowed it upon her. But I shall have to do it. I shall have to find out Roche, I suppose, and make myself pleasant to him.”

“ We’ll hope he has stuff enough in him to keep your mother in order,” Gilbert said hopefully. “ Of course you don’t wish this affair kept dark from *my* mother ? Poor dear, she’ll be a little shocked at finding herself within hail of her husband’s first wife ; but she’s such a sensible, brave, clear-headed woman, that she’ll make the very best that is made of the situation.”

“ Has she ever spoken to you about my parentage ?—has she ever conjectured who and what *my* mother might have been ? ”

“ She has, but I haven’t responded. The fact is, Rollamore, I’ve been nursing a stupid misconception for the last few months. I have made an imbecile mistake—misjudged an excellent woman—and made the

girl I love, and *mean to marry*, miserable as well as myself."

Then he told how Doctor Sheffield had found a mare's nest, and he (Gilbert) had accepted it and all its possible consequences.

"You'll soon make that crooked matter straight with Miss Maunders? Lord Rollamore said interrogatively, whereat Gilbert shook his head rather glumly. In making this crooked matter straight with Florence, he might be compelled to confess to having thought such hard things of her mother that the girl would never forgive him.

"It will be a difficult business, but I shall do my best to get Florence to look at my hasty action in the best light."

"I don't envy you the task of telling her. Girls forgive a good many things in a fellow, though, if they feel he has loved them through thick and thin."

"I certainly have never wavered in my love for Florence, though I tried my hardest to stamp it out. It was too deep—it wouldn't be effaced."

"I hope I may be able to convince the girl I love that I've never wavered in my devotion to her, though I did marry another woman," Lord Rollamore said rather mournfully. Then he went on to tell Gilbert a little, but not all, about Valerie.

"She is a gentlewoman who has become a model, I presume?" Gilbert asked.

"Yes, that's about it. Nothing very distinguished in the way of family, you know, but a lady-like, clever, able girl—quite capable of holding her own in any society, especially when she is Lady Rollamore. She was awfully fond of me—awfully!" he went on plaintively. "But she was so enraged when she found I was going to marry for money, that I may find it

harder work to bring her round than I care to contemplate. I shall go and see her as soon as I can get away."

"Your late wife is to be buried to-morrow, I believe?" Gilbert said remindingly; "pardon me, old man, for interfering, but don't do anything in such haste as to shock the county. Write to her, make your peace with her, secure her promise and give her yours, but do not do anything in such haste as to set people against her."

"It is easy for you to counsel delay! you have no need to exercise patience in your own case," Lord Rollamore answered, half-grumblingly, half-laughingly. But all the same he took Gilbert's counsel to heart, and resolved to be guided by it in the matter of allowing a decent time to elapse before bringing home a new wife.

When Gilbert left him that night, the master of the house went off to bed, and on his dressing-table he found that note which Madame Roche had sent to him earlier in the evening.

"Whatever she has to tell me more will keep very well till to-morrow," he thought wearily. "She has a curious way of getting excited at night. Couldn't stand an interview with her now."

When the morrow came, the dull, solemn, funereal function occupied him, and, on coming home after it, he had to meet the lawyer and executors and hear the will read.

It was a lengthy document, and a just one, he thought hastily, when the lawyer had nearly concluded the reading. With the exception of five hundred a year to her daughter May, everything was left to her "beloved husband, Francis White Kilburn, Lord Rollamore."

"But there is a codicil, I find," said the lawyer,

“written in her own handwriting, duly witnessed by Dr. Sheffield and her daughter, May Torrens. This codicil will be rather a surprise to you, I fear, Lord Rollamore. By it she bequeaths the whole of her best property, with the exception of the aforesaid five hundred a year, to her dear friend Madame Roche.”

“And Madame Roche will restore it to her son,” that lady exclaimed, holding her hands out, theatrically, towards him.

Thus it was that the fact of their relationship was made public. Thus it was that, at the outset, he was forced into the position of seeming to be cold and ungrateful to his mother, because he could not bring himself to rapturously accept and thank her for her generously, expressed intentions towards him.

“For my own part, I am perfectly contented that you should be the sole one to benefit by my late wife’s will. I have enough of my own without depriving you of any portion of that which she must have wished you to have, or she would not have left it to you. But I’m sorry for you, May, for you and Fergus. I consider you have been shamefully treated.”

He had been speaking coldly and formally till he addressed the girl. Then his annoyance got the better of him, and he spoke with heat and emotion.

“Your chief interest, even now, is for ‘Fergus ! ‘Fergus, indeed ! ’” Madame Roche cried, striking the arm of her chair with her clenched hand, and hurting the latter. “You care more for the woman who took the place from which I was unfairly ousted. You care more for that woman and her brood than you do for your own mother. You scorn my offer of enriching you, and, in the same breath—unnatural !—you lament that Fergus is not enriched.”

“This is scarcely seemly ; we had better not discuss

this subject, mother," he said desperately, as May rose and made her way out of the room.

"If my mention of these truths is 'unseemly,' don't you goad me into stating them," she retorted. "Give up this intimacy with these Kilburns, which is an insult to me. I am your mother. I demand this sacrifice, if it is one, of you! If you will not make it for love of me, you may be compelled to make it one day, for I will not be insulted with impunity, even by my own son, Lord Rollamore!"

She laid a taunting, mocking, emphasis on the last two words, and he, seeing that excitement, and perhaps wine, had robbed her of all self-control, gave the signal for this little party to disperse. As soon as the lawyer and Doctor Sheffield, who was one of the late Lady Rollamore's executors, had gone, she calmed down, and spoke more quietly.

"We will quit this painful money subject for a time, my son! In my anger I threatened harder things than I am capable of performing. Only be kind to me, only side with me against every one who is opposed to me, and I will enrich you with every fraction I possess, and guard your interests as I would my life."

"My interests are perfectly secure, thank you," he said, coldly.

"Are they? Ah, you think so, do you? I could topple them over like a house of cards!" she raved out, passing into fury again in indescribable and unreasonable haste. "Foolish woman that I am, to dream of winning affection and consideration from the son of your father! But, if I cannot 'win' it, I can, and will, command it!"

"Do let us speak together like civilized beings, not like a couple of untutored, irresponsible savages," he sighed. "You compel me to seem what, Heaven

knows, I've no desire to be, unfilial and undutiful to you. Let us speak of what it will be best for us both that we should do in the future. I wish to discuss the matter of your future residence with you, mother. You will feel with me that it will not be well you should live here. In time I shall bring home another wife—"

"And, pray, who may she be?" she interrupted, speaking with a forced composure that was ominous.

"A girl I knew and loved, and was cowardly enough not to marry, before I knew I was going to be what I am, and independent of the world," he answered boldly.

"I should have done well to have married her then, even if I had always remained plain Francis White, with little or nothing a-year. I shall do well to marry her now that I have both rank and fortune, for she loves me as I love her, and that's a great deal better than I deserve."

"May I ask who this paragon is?"

"Her name is Valerie Heath."

"And she is—"

"She is a good, hard-working, brave, dear girl—"

"That's a rambling statement, and not at all to the point, Lord Rollamore. Out with the truth! What is my future daughter-in-law's present social status? I hope, at last, there is going to be a Lady Rollamore who can show a clean record!"

Her tone was so aggressive, that he forgot she was his mother, and only remembered that she was throwing a poisoned shaft at the good, gracious, widow lady, whom he had learnt to regard with such esteem that it almost amounted to affection.

"My father's widow certainly has a clean record. She's one of the best and truest women that ever lived. Don't assail her!"

"Your 'father's' widow!" she sneered. "Boy, you

drive me mad by holding up these people at every turn. What about this girl—this Valerie Heath? What is she?—nurse-maid, ballet-girl, barmaid—what?”

“She’s an artist’s model, and she is good,” he said, sternly; “I won’t trust myself to say more about her now.”

She drove her finger-nails into the palms of her hands, and subdued an outbreak of temper.

“Very well,” she said, briefly; “we will say no more about her to-night. You give me to understand that you feel I have no right to be critical in my judgment about another woman. I’ll let that insult pass, for I can make you apologize for it any day, if I like to exert my power. Now, hear something that affects *me* and my happiness, and *my* peace of mind. An evil threatens me which you can help to avert. Mr. Roche, my husband, announces that he is coming here to Caddleton, to either settle down with me, or take me away with him. Now, to be quite candid with you, I hate Mr. Roche, but—he holds a secret of mine, and if I do not entreat him courteously, and pay him liberally for his silence, he may injure us both—you, as well as me. You must be guided by me in your treatment of Mr. Roche, and as he is as thoroughly weary of me as I am of him, he will leave me in peace if you get him recognized and received as your stepfather. It is a little thing to ask of you, Rollamore!”

“I will wait and see what Mr. Roche is like before I make any promises.”

“And when you see him! Ah! when you see him, I know how he will strike you. I know how he strikes me now when I look at him—even custom hasn’t deadened the sharp pang of mortification and rage which is my portion whenever he approaches me.”

“What on earth made you marry him?” Lord Rollamore asked gruffly.

“Poverty, and the desire to live down an evil report,” she replied airily; “he was so respectable, so unctuous, such a favorite with a lot of dear, comfortably-off, old, low-church ladies, that I thought, ‘here, at least, is safety.’”

“Is Mr. Roche a parson?”

“He has been many things by turns, and nothing long, but never a parson,” she said wearily. “I think, if he were a parson, I could never go into a church again. No, he was ‘lay reader,’ I think he called himself, when I met him at a fashionable inland watering-place. He was so respectable, so smug, that any one of his old ladies would have been delighted to marry and maintain him. But he preferred me, because I carried on with a dash that deluded him into the idea that I had money. They had such faith in him that they accepted me at first. But he spoilt everything by rousing my jealousy. Fool that I was to be jealous of such a creature! But I was, and in my rage I exposed him to the parents of the girl to whom he was making love. Her brother laid a whip over his shoulders, and we had to leave the place. Then he hated me, and left me to shift for myself, and I—shifted for myself. Now he finds that I shall be, must be, received as your mother; and he is coming to share my good fortune. Deal warily with him, or he will revenge himself upon you, and ruin you.”

Lord Rollamore laughed contemptuously.

“He can’t do that. I’m beyond the power of such a cur as you describe your husband to be.”

“Take warning! Be cautious! Temporize with him, for your own sake as well as mine,” she cried agitatedly; and he, feeling sick to death of the domes-

tic drama which was being unfolded for his learning, promised that he would do his best to satisfy the requirements of Mr. Roche.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE SUBSTANCE OF MR. ROCHE.

“I SUPPOSE I am very weak and very selfish. But I love you so much, that I can only say, if you want me, I am ready to come to you. I know it would be fine and generous of me if I reminded you that I am not fit to mate with you, now that you’re a lord as well as being a rich man. But if *you* think that the girl who’s been your model is good enough to be your wife, *I’ll* try to think so too.”

These were some of the words which Valerie Heath wrote in answer to Lord Rollamore’s earnest appeal to her that she would forgive and love him again. In his joy, he told Gilbert of his success, and Gilbert counselled him “to have it out with the old lady at once.”

“She’s not deficient in common-sense, in the early hours of the day at least. Put it to that common-sense, before Roche comes, that it will be well for her to make a home for herself elsewhere. Your future wife and your mother may be decently friendly if they don’t live together.”

“They never shall live together—on that I’m determined. But my mother is deuced hard to move. She takes refuge in some imaginary terror of Roche whenever I propose that she should leave Parkventon. ‘Pon my word, Gilbert, Roche hangs over me like a fog or a nightmare. I’d rather see the fellow in the flesh than

have the prospect of him dangled before my eyes, as my poor mother insists on doing."

Very soon after this conversation Roche came ; and then the unfortunate Lord Rollamore was fain to confess that, horrible as the mere prospect of him had been, the present personality of the man was infinitely worse."

Mr. Roche drove up from Caddleton in an open carriage, drawn by the best pair of horses the posting-house could supply. He had announced himself to the landlord, the drivers, and the ostlers as "Lord Rollamore's stepfather." "Come down to pay him a long visit," he had added ; and the whole establishment had looked its ways smartly in obedience to his behests.

The report of him ran through the little town rapidly, and when he was seen driving away, a sense of disappointment set in the breasts of the acute among the observers, that yet another of Lord Rollamore's belongings should be so utterly unsatisfactory. If Mr. Roche had been a rough but honest-looking backwoodsman, or a gentlemanly, refined-looking scamp, or a perfectly commonplace, tradesmanlike-looking person, the place would have tolerated him more readily. But, instead of being any one of these things, he was an unctuous smooth-faced, beady, black-eyed man of about forty, with a variable manner, that betrayed a doubt he would have died to hide of himself.

There was a clerical cut about his coat and white tie, which misled the many into believing him to be a clergyman, but the landlord of the inn had seen the name on his luggage, and corrected that idea swiftly.

"This party's luggage was all labelled Henry Roche, *Esquire*. He's no parson—doesn't seem gentleman enough for that, but he's free-handed and haughty-spoken enough to be the Prince of Wales. Lord Rol-

lamore won't want him at Parkventon long, I reckon."

While the landlord was delivering this dictum concerning him, Mr Roche was rehearsing the speeches and action wherewith he should insinuate himself into Lord Rollamore's favor and confidence.

"For I'll try fair means first," he decided; "and, if they fail, I'll 'try another method,' as the cookery books say. The secret gives me a good leverage over madame, too. If she doesn't hand over the bulk of the property she wheedled out of that poor old woman to me, down comes her house of cards and her son's castles in the air. If they are both sensible, I'll hold my hand, and we'll all live together, and be happy and comfortable, and go into the best society. After all, Henry Roche you didn't do so badly for yourself when you became stepfather to Lord Rollamore!"

He drove up to the door with a smile on one side of his face, that would have prepossessed the most rudimentary student in physiognomy against him. The side of his face that smiled had a puffy cheek, that was apt to get flushed when he was agitated or excited. It presented this round red spot to the observant gaze now, while the rest of his face remained pallid.

He asked for Lord Rollamore first, and, on being ushered into that gentleman's presence, he fell into his first error. The one ambition of the man's life was to seem to be on terms of equality with what he always spoke of as the "upper ten." To address a nobleman in an off-hand, friendly way, gave him sensations of pleasure that are indescribable.

"My dear Rollamore, this is a moment I have been looking forward to for years, ever since I had the good fortune to marry your excellent mother, in fact," he began, holding out both hands—these hands were cased

in ill-fitting black kid. Lord Rollamore contented himself with coldly touching one of them.

"This visit is quite unexpected by me," he said stiffly.

"I have waited for an invitation, waited patiently for three weeks," Mr. Roche purred, putting his one-sided smile on, and rubbing his already far too shiny hat in a caressing way that exasperated Lord Rollamore.

"The invitation not arriving, I thought it better for all parties concerned to come and establish friendly relations with you at once. Do I not stand in the relation of a father to you, my dear son?"

Lord Rollamore felt that he had done many foolish things in his life. Still, he was conscious that he did not quite deserve *this*.

"Is my mother aware that you are here?" he asked.

"My dear wife has not been apprised of the fact. I wished to see you first. I thought it better that we should understand each other, without any intervention from your mother."

Lord Rollamore bowed slightly by way of answer. Mr. Roche stroked his hat rather more severely, and the red spot on his largest cheek assumed a deeper dye.

"My object in coming here, Lord Rollamore, is twofold. I desire, in the first place, to give your mother—of whose antecedents I don't wish now to speak—the protection of a husband's presence. I desire, in the second place, to get all the social benefit I can from my relationship to your lordship."

He smiled and stroked his hat, and cringed his body forward in affected humility as he spoke, and Lord Rollamore's whole nature rose in revolt against him.

"I tell you at once, distinctly and definitely, Mr. Roche, you will get no social advantages or benefits from the connection—which I deeply deplore—with

myself. Your gross allusion to my mother's past history has raised a barrier between us, which can never be broken down or overstepped. For an hour you are welcome to the hospitality of this house. At the expiration of that hour, I must request that you leave the house, and never return to it again."

Mr. Roche got up from the comfortable chair in which he had ensconced himself in his amazement.

"My young game-cock, you're only a barn-door fowl after all!" he said sneeringly. "I'll tell you something that will stop your crowing. You're going to turn me out, are you? I'm not good enough to be introduced to your fine friends, am I? Well, Lord Rollamore, we'll see about that when I've had a talk with your mother! Meanwhile, I'll have something to eat and drink, and you take care that I'm well served, *Lord Rollamore.*"

He laid an insulting emphasis on the last two words. His whole manner was a jeer. Yet what "could Lord Rollamore do other than he had done?" he asked himself as he left Mr. Roche in possession of the field, and went away to consult his mother after ordering a rich repast to be served without delay to his obnoxious visitor.

Mrs. Roche met him with a half-frightened, wholly deprecating air, that told its own tale of dread and distrust of the man she had married.

"I hear he has come," she began. "Rollamore, do believe me, he has not come by my wish or invitation. I have done all I can to keep him away, but this has been his custom all along. No sooner do I establish myself anywhere, and obtain recognition in good society, than he comes and wrecks me by his pushing, fawning, horribly underbred manner. Ah, how I have suffered through that man!"

“Why on earth did you marry him ;” Lord Rollamore asked testily.

“I have told you. I was desolate and in poverty. He knew that my son would have rank, and wealth, and importance one day, and he thought it would be a good investment to marry me. He has taunted me with that truth over and over again, and in return I have tried to keep him in order by telling him *my* secret. Would to Heaven I could lock it up in my own breast again, for if, in his spite, he makes it public, it will damage *you* !”

“Won’t you confide your secret to me ? Surely it would be better that you should do so, since he knows it, and is likely to make a malicious use of it.”

“I can’t—I dare not !” she shuddered. “My life’s work would be undone if I told you. But do trust me—do believe that, for your own sake, it will be well that you should temporize with this man—that you should please and flatter him even—if you can bring yourself to do it !”

She spoke earnestly and in evident alarm, but his aversion to Mr. Roche was too strong to permit him to make the concession she craved for.

“I have ordered him to leave my house in an hour. He is a man with whom I can’t possibly temporize or hold any but the most distant intercourse. If he threatens me, as he seems to have threatened you, I will have him removed by force. Life wouldn’t be worth living if I went into bondage to the evil tongue of such a cad as Mr. Roche is proving himself to be.”

“Oh, Rollamore, be guided by me !” she implored. “Go away for a few days—do anything rather than aggravate him. Meanwhile, I will try to get him to go away peacefully, without making a scene or raising a scandal.”

“My dear mother, what *are* you afraid of?” he asked, more kindly than he had ever addressed her before. “If you shrink from the idea of his coarsely speaking in this neighborhood of the sad story of your earlier life, remember that he can tell people nothing new, even if in his malice he descends to the utter baseness of saying anything against you. So dismiss that fear. *I* will support you and stand by you, if you will separate yourself from a man whom you evidently dislike and distrust.”

“Ah! you don’t know what you counsel; you don’t know what you say,” she moaned. “There is danger even in my having this interview with you before I see him, and learn what his wishes and intentions are. Go away for a few days, Rollamore, till I have smoothed matters. If you meet and oppose him again, something terrible will happen.”

“He’ll hardly go the length of taking my life because I won’t be a cork-jacket to float him into society.”

“He may be goaded by his extravagant vanity and snobbish desire to obtain a recognized place in decent society, to take what you value more than life.”

“Come, mother, he can neither take my good name, nor the girl I love, from me.”

“The girl you love! This is the first I have heard about her. Tell me quickly, are you going to marry at last, as you ought?”

“I think so.”

“Tell me, tell me,” she cried impatiently. “All your life I have been ambitious for you. My own ambitions were so cruelly crushed; but even when I was first hurled down and trodden under foot, I thought of you, I protected your interests. It has been my dream for years to see you, *my* son, occupying a high position. Tell me, who is the lady you have chosen.”

“A dear, good girl, who loves me, and will make me very happy.”

“Is she a daughter of one of the county families, or did you meet her in London?”

“I met her in London. You mustn’t be disappointed when I tell you that she’s not a highly-born girl. Her father was a poor city clerk. She maintains herself and her little brother, and educates the boy entirely by her own efforts.”

“And those efforts? What are they? Is she an actress?”

“She is a model. I have painted her half-a-score times. I can show you what she’s like if you’ll come to my own den.”

Then Mrs. Roche rose up and wrung her hands, and alternately stormed and wailed at him.

“You are bent on your own destruction,” she raved, “you—*you* to try and play the part of King Cophetua. It is madness. You are bound by your duty to me and to yourself to marry fittingly. You threw yourself away on a vulgar woman once, and now you are going to do worse and throw yourself away on a vulgar young one.”

“She is not that,” he said sharply. “Come, mother, be reasonable; turn your thoughts to this man who has forced himself upon me. How can you best deal with him, and persuade him to leave me in peace? I’ll go away for a few days as you propose, and trust to you to get Mr. Roche away before he makes us all ridiculous.”

“Ungrateful!” she sobbed, “you will go to this girl, probably, to this girl who has been your model, and the model, I presume, of every other man who cared to pay her for exhibiting her charms. You will go to

her, and leave me, your mother, to combat the worst difficulty of her life alone."

"You are not reasonable, mother ; if you will let me share your secret, I will gladly enough share your difficulties, and strive my best to free you from them."

"Boy ! you don't know what you are talking about. You don't know your own danger ! You madden me by your folly and frivolity. To dream of spoiling such a career as yours might be for the sake of a pretty, low-born Dulcinea ! *How* can I save you from yourself ?"

"Take me into your confidence," he was beginning to plead, when Mr. Roche, flushed and shiny from the effects of a heavy luncheon, came into the room.

"I have given myself the freedom of the house at once, you perceive, Rollamore," he began affably.

"Ah, my dear wife, bright and blooming as ever, I am delighted to observe. I'm sorry to find, though, that prosperity is affecting your memory ; you forgot to remind your son that he ought to have invited me to Parkventon."

"Will you never leave me in peace ?" she muttered angrily. "Yes, go, Rollamore ! it is better you should go. Leave me to deal with this man alone."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"I'LL UNRAVEL IT."

"I HAVE an explanation to make to you. When I have made it you will probably be so justly angry with me that you will find it hard to forgive me."

Florence read this sentence, in the first letter Gilbert Kilburn had addressed to her since the one in which he had broken off their engagement, with painfully mixed

feelings. That he had found a solution of the difficulty which divided them she did not doubt.

“But how shall I feel about it?” she asked herself. “It will be very hard for me to love and trust him again, even if he wants me to do it, and he hasn’t said he does that yet.”

She read this sentence from his letter to her mother, and as Mrs. Maunders had never known that he had suspected her of the sin of being his father’s first dishonored wife, she failed, as signally as her daughter had done, in putting a right construction upon this first instalment of his apology.

“I am afraid the Kilburns are a variable race,” Mrs. Maunders said to her married daughter when they were discussing this letter of attempted reconciliation which Florence had received. It was the hour before Mrs. Maunders’s early dinner, and Kathleen had dropped in for a mid-day chat after doing her marketing.

“I fancy that, from what Ned tells me, Mr. Kilburn has a very good explanation to give for himself. He was very miserable himself at the time, poor fellow. I do hope Flo and he will make it up, and marry after all.”

“It does seem a wayward fate, after all, that *my* daughter should marry a ‘Gilbert Kilburn,’” Mrs. Maunders said musingly; “I used to feel so sorry for the poor young man all those years that I was bound to secrecy, knowing that he was not the heir, and yet not daring to give him a hint of his false position.”

“Well, never mind it now, mother. He’s happy enough, or will be if he makes it up with Flo, and he’s comfortably enough off to afford himself the luxury of a wife. You see, his half-brother and he are such friends, that Ned says Lord Rollamore won’t move a step without consulting Gilbert. He wants Gilbert to

negotiate with that dreadful Mr. Roche, who has taken up his quarters at Parkventon, and try to get him to go away without making a disturbance. Ned says the way that horrid man bullies and tyrannizes over Mrs. Roche is distressing to witness. She seems absolutely to go in terror of her life of him, though he's always suave and smiling to her before people. But the servants say he's dreadful to her when they're alone, and is always threatening to 'expose her' if she doesn't agree to all his wishes. He made her go out with him yesterday, and pay a lot of calls on all the best people in the neighborhood, and then he was furious because every one said not at home. He is disgusting all the old servants by the airs he gives himself. He told Ned yesterday that if he couldn't fill the house with people of the neighborhood, he'd fill it with his own old friends from town, and see how Lord Rollamore liked them. Really, his wife ought to remember that she is Lord Rollamore's mother, and make Mr. Roche go away."

"My poor cousin was always as weak as water where men were concerned," Mrs. Maunders sighed. "If I thought I could do any good, I'd go over and see them, and try and persuade them both to go away. They both ought to go. They are both detrimental to his honor and happiness, and if she has the real feelings of a mother, she will consider her son's welfare more than her own pleasures, and go away with her husband, however bad he may be to her, if he won't go without her."

"He will neither go without her or with her—there's the difficulty. He means to buy a big place close by, if he can get it, with his wife's money, and make Lord Rollamore force the county to receive him. He wants to be a magistrate, and to keep a pack of hounds, though I'm certain, from the look of him, he can't ride a bit.

I can't describe to you how arrogant and vulgar he is, mamma. His wife always seemed bold and defiant enough before he came, but he has completely cowed her."

"I can't understand it ; she is so completely independent of him, one would imagine. Poor woman ! her sin has found her out indeed."

"And though she's so abject to him," Mrs. Sheffield resumed, "she gives herself ghastly airs to every one else. May Torrens won't stay in the house with her, so she has come down here to the Kilburns. Mrs. Roche quite lost her head yesterday, and cried and stamped with fury when a letter came from Lord Rollamore saying he wanted his house cleared in order that he might set about making some building alterations. She said she knew he 'was going to marry some low girl, and upset her life's work and all her plans for him ;' and her husband laughed at her, and drove her nearly wild. Such scenes go on there ! Mrs. Jennings is going, and the coachman is only waiting for 'his lordship to come home' to give notice ; and everything, both inside and outside the house, is at sixes and sevens."

"Poor Lord Rollamore ! he has been placed in a false position all the days of his life ; he has always been the victim of his mother's crime," Mrs. Maunders said sorrowfully.

"Is Mr. Roche the man she ran away with ? She did run away from her first husband, didn't she, mother ?"

"No, no ; he's not the man with whom she ran—well, she didn't 'run away' at all. Her husband had reason to be jealous of her, and divorced her. It's a subject I'd rather not discuss, dear, for, though my cousin was a faulty woman, I loved her dearly once."

"But, mamma, do tell me this one thing : if Mr. Roche wasn't the man on whose account she was divorced, who was it ? "

"I never knew him."

"But surely you must have heard his name, and something about him ? "

"He was one of her husband's grooms," Mrs. Maunders confessed unwillingly ; "and that made her conduct all the worse, for she must have been the tempter. She left her beautiful home, her kind husband, and her dear little helpless child for the sake of a low wretch who had nothing but a handsome person to recommend him, and who tired of her very soon, and deserted her. It's a pitiful story, Kathleen—one that I have tried to wipe out of my memory vainly for years, one that I can't tell without agony now."

"Poor mother, you loved your cousin so much, did you ? " Kathleen said softly. "Looking at her now, and hearing of the things she does and says, I can't fancy her at all a lovable person."

"I loved her once," Mrs. Maunders said softly.

"And her husband—the one who was after Lord Rollamore—did you know him ? "

"I did ! "

"Had he forgotten you when he came here as Lord Rollamore ? "

"Completely forgotten me ! "

"Why didn't you recall yourself to his memory, mamma ! "

"I was only too glad that he had forgotten me ! "

"I suppose you thought he would visit your cousin's sins on you ? "

"We won't speak of it any more, Kathleen. I fear, when Gilbert Kilburn realizes that Florence is related

to his father's first wife, he will think better of his proposal."

"He can't be so mean! Oh, no, mother, he loves her too well to let that fact weigh with him. Poor dear Flo, she has kept up so bravely all this time, I do hope she is going to be happy at last, as happy as I am, for instance—she can't well be happier."

Even as she was saying this, Florence came into the room, beaming and beautiful.

"Gilbert is here, mother!" she began; "everything is smooth between us again. I'm the luckiest and the happiest girl in the world. He is going to take me to his mother this afternoon. Come and see him, and tell him you'll be glad to have him for a son."

"Glad? Ah, Florence, I can never make any of you young people know how glad I am. I am almost too nervous to tell him so. I dread breaking down."

"But why *should* you be nervous?" healthy, happy young Florence asked impatiently; "now, I might have been excused when Gilbert came in and explained himself. I wasn't a bit—I listened quite calmly to his explanation, and promised that you would forgive him for a silly mistake he made about you, mother dear."

Then she briefly told them of the letter which Doctor Sheffield had found in the book in the old secretary, and of the misconceptions which had arisen in the minds of both Gilbert Kilburn and Doctor Sheffield in consequence of it.

"Gilbert says he could almost have fallen on Mrs. Roche's neck and wept for joy when he heard that *she* was his father's first wife, and not you, mother. Now, come and let him fall on your neck instead."

There was a good deal of quiet rejoicing in the Maunders's household that day. But through it all Mrs. Maunders kept on telling herself that 'things would

not be as well' if all were known! Gilbert Kilburn would be as pitiless to a fault or a folly of which *he* was not the cause, as his father was before him."

It was rather a relief to them all that they were able to fall back upon Mr. Roche as a topic. There were no pathetic undercurrents where he was concerned. He was all broad comedy to outsiders, though a very sad bit of tragedy to his wife.

"Rollamore is coming home to-morrow," Gilbert told them. "I'm going to meet him at the station, and back him up in his sortie on his own house. Between us, we hope to improve Mr. and Mrs. Roche off the premises. But we're not very sanguine. She's so furious at Rollamore's engagement, that she won't side with him against Roche. And Roche seems determined to cling to the shadow of respectability which staying at Parkventon confers on him."

"What an awful thing it must be to have such thick-skinned relations to deal with," Florence laughed. "I seem to feel, though, that I could tackle Mr. Roche and get rid of him. Have his luggage put out of the house, Gilbert. Send all the servants away, and leave him in possession of an empty larder and locked cellar if he doesn't follow his luggage. He wouldn't hold on at Parkventon long if he had nothing to eat."

"I'll suggest your plan to Rollamore, but you see there's a lady in the case. He can't turn his mother out of the house, and, in starving out the obnoxious step-father, he would strike a blow at her."

"If she has any motherly feeling, she will go without causing a scandal. I can't understand her being 'afraid' of Mr. Roche; she used to be very high-spirited."

"Perhaps there is some reason we 'wot not of' for her submissive bearing to Roche. There must be, I

think, or she wouldn't hang on at Parkventon, where she isn't happy, merely because he orders her to stay. You have suggested a mystery to me, Mrs. Maunders, and I'll unravel it in Rollamore's interest."

CHAPTER XXIX.

"OVER THE BRINK OF IT."

"ROLLAMORE comes home to-day, doesn't he?" Mr. Roche inquired of his wife, as he seated himself opposite to her at the breakfast-table.

"He does, expecting to find us gone. Why can't you understand that you would be happier anywhere than here? Why can't you spare me the torture of seeing that my son hates my presence in his house?"

"Why don't you understand that I care no more for your son's feelings than I do for yours?" he answered, with a coarse laugh. "He'll find it to his advantage to saddle his horse with mine. I only married you for the sake of being stepfather to the future Lord Rollamore, and I mean to derive all the benefit I can from the connection."

"You forget that he can turn you out."

"If he tries that game I'll turn *him* out. Don't be a fool, Mrs. Roche. You should have kept your own counsel if you wanted to work the oracle without me."

After this interchange of amenities, the husband and wife parted for a few hours, he to work out a scheme he had for subduing Lord Rollamore, and effecting an entrance into county society, she to think out a far more important matter—a matter that would, if revealed, rob her of that rag of respectability which she had seemed to have attained after many years.

"If I can keep my temper! If I *only* can keep my temper, all may be well even now," she kept on saying to herself; "But Roche can madden me at any moment, and in my madness I may be rash. He is my evil genius, and I am my son's."

She was standing at the window of her bedroom as she meditated, and presently she saw her husband emerge from the house, looking more carefully kempt than usual, and with a sanguine expression on his smug face that forewarned her of his being bent on some enterprise of which she would disapprove. He looked up and waved his black gloves at her in token that she was to come down and join him. Unwillingly enough she went, to find him already seated in an open carriage, horsed by Lord Rollamore's prize pair, which he never permitted any one to use but himself.

"You are not going to take out those horses, surely?" she asked excitedly, and he assured her that not only was he going to take out those horses, but that she was to accompany him for a drive.

"If in the course I like to make a call or two, you may as well be with me. You were more accustomed to this style of thing in the days gone by than I was, so mind you give a good impression to the neighborhood.

"But no one has called on me," she said, in an agony of mortification; "it is impossible for me to force an entrance into people's houses. I tell you, Mr. Roche, they will not know either of us. You are going out of your way to bring us both to confusion."

"A little time ago you were as keen as I was about being floated into a decent sphere by your precious son. Why have you changed your tune?"

"Because, I see now that it is an impossibility. He can't serve us in any way, why should we injure him?"

“He'll serve me for fear very soon, if he won't for love, Mrs. Roche. Go and put on your bonnet; get yourself up to look smart, as you know how to look. I'm going to take you to call on the widow, Lady Rollamore, and I'm going to make her understand that, if she wishes well by her stepson, she must take us up.”

“She's not a society-woman at all. She lives quite a recluse life. She has not the power to obtain a recognition for you from the county, even if she had the will.”

“You allow me to be the best judge where my own welfare is concerned; make haste and dress yourself and come with me,” he said impatiently.

“That I will not do!”

“You will,” he said, in an evil tone.

Then he leant over the sides of the carriage, and whispered something, which had the effect of enraging—and subduing her.

“I will come, but you shall not force me into the presence of Lady Rollamore. The insult to her would be one she could never forgive, and I could never offer. Do you deny me the least bit of womanly feeling, that you can propose such a thing?” she muttered, hoping the servants would not hear her.

“Well, I'll let you off calling there, if you'll come at once, and look cheerful about it.”

“I wish I had never been rash enough to come to this place at all,” she grumbled, as they drove away.

“You are ruining everything by your preposterous folly. If you quarrel with my son, or try to injure him in any way, you shall never have one penny from me as long as you live. If you will be sensible, you shall share my fortune with me, and I will leave the bulk of it to you. You are younger than I am. Come to these terms with me, and enjoy your prosperity instead of cultivat-

ing a vindictive spirit, that will injure yourself in the end, as much as it will injure Rollamore and me.”

“I’m not vindictive, my dear ; that’s where you make the mistake. I only want to benefit myself, not to injure a single one of my fellow-creatures. I’ve always wished to live respected, and to be sought for, and to see people in a station above what I was born think highly of me, and cultivate my acquaintance. I married you with that object, and I’ve kept it well before me for years.”

“You must have been sanguine, indeed, if you thought my respectability would do all these fine things for you,” she said bitterly.

“I knew you were clever enough to affect a virtue if you had it not, and I remembered that in time your son would be Lord Rollamore. Well, my dear, you haven’t affected the virtue ; you, personally, have been rather a hindrance to me in my upward flight. But your son can help me to take my place with ease as a model country gentleman.”

“*You* a country gentleman !” she scoffed ; “*you*, who never crossed a saddle or shouldered a gun in your life, picture yourself walking through a turnip-field in your frock-coat and black kid gloves, and then ask yourself if you would be congruous with the keepers and pointers.”

“I could change my dress,” he replied, almost meekly.

“But not your manner of wearing it. Your manner always becomes cringing when you are in the company of those you believe to be your betters, whether they are or not. Take my advice. Go away from here, where your vanity will be mortified perpetually. Leave poor Rollamore in peace. He has never injured you. He does not even resent the idea of my giving you the money I wheedled his wife into leaving me.”

“You don’t know how I’ve set my heart on being recognized as a member of a great family,” he pleaded fawningly ; “I would never disgrace him. I’d spend money in the neighborhood freely.”

“*My* money, remember !”

“Your money, if you like to be mean enough to remind me that it was yours before you gave it to me. I’d never disgrace him. I’d learn to keep a silent tongue in my head, and if once I felt happy and at ease, I should pick up a quiet, gentlemanly manner.”

Reminding herself that she had much to gain, and everything to lose, as far as her son is concerned, she took advantage of Mr. Roche’s lapse into temporary mildness to remark that it would be a good earnest of his intended reformation and improvement in manner and social habits, if he at once ordered Lord Rollamore’s horses’ heads to be turned homewards, and refrain from using them again without Lord Rollamore’s permission.

“Oh ! I’m not going to give myself up entirely,” he replied suspiciously. “There must be a little give and take between his lordship and me. I’m not going to be treated like a pardoned criminal. I shall expect him to be as affable to me as he is to his ‘half-brother,’ Gilbert Kilburn. I’ve just as good a claim on his affability and forbearance, if he only knew it.”

“Ah, but he doesn’t know it. Now, will you give me one little bit of pleasure,—the first I’ve had since we came here,—say we’ll go home? I don’t like these horses. They have restless eyes, and the coachman is annoyed at driving *us*. I see it all. Let us go home before anything happens.”

They were coming to a part of the road where the railway line ran along it for some few hundred yards, and then crossed a slanting bridge over the highway. It is

not a good pice of driving ground when trains are due along by its side, for only a few weak hurdles guard the side of it that slopes down precipitously to a few cottages and allotment gardens. Almost as Mrs. Roche spoke, they saw an express train coming down the incline to meet them, smoking furiously, and making a hideous noise. The horses, moved by contrary spirits of terror and devilry, made one dash forward, thus getting an enormous way on ; the next moment they swerved round towards the precipitous declivity, hung suspended over it for an instant or two, then fell promiscuously an awful heap of crushed humanity and horse into the roadway beneath.

CHAPTER XXX.

A REPULSE.

THE remains of one of the horses was presently disentangled from the one that still lived, with a badly broken knee. The coachman, who was only stunned, was picked out, and conveyed by some handy laborers to a cottage near. Mrs. Roche, much shaken and bruised, dazed, but not insensible, was taken in charge tenderly by the laborer's wife. Then, all these things being done, the footman, who had escaped with a great fright, remembered that the "old gentleman" had been in the carriage when it went over the bank.

So they searched again, and finally found a seriously damaged Mr. Roche under the *débris* of the carriage—a man so shattered and maimed that he could not be moved at all until a doctor and an ambulance came to his aid. Even then, though he was moved under the greatest and most cautious conditions, his hold of life seemed so slack, that it was doubtful two or three times

whether it was a corpse they were taking back to Park-venton, or only a dying man.

It was such a catastrophe that, when Lord Rollamore came home and heard of it, his lips were sealed by human kindness as to any annoyance he must have felt about his horses. He was puzzled and pained by his mother's manner of mentioning the accident. At one moment she would sob and lament over the prospect of either being left a solitary widow, or of being tied to a cripple husband for the remainder of her life ; at another she would hysterically declare it to be "a judgment on Mr. Roche for his selfish intention of aggrandizing himself at the expense of Lord Rollamore." But when pressed for an explanation of this suggestion of injurious intention, she could only be got to declare herself to be a miserably misunderstood woman—one whose lot it had always been to bring ruin on those who loved her, unhappiness to those she loved.

Weeks wore away in this way. Still the time did not seem tedious to Lord Rollamore, who had pleasant thoughts of Valerie Heath wherewith to beguile the time.

All his arrangements for his marriage were completed ; Valerie was to come down with her young brother, stay with the Dowager Lady Rollamore, and be married from the cottage. The girl had no false pride about her, no fear of being despised by those aristocrats among whom she was coming for having pursued an honest calling—for she had pursued it honestly. Moreover, she rejoiced in the thought that, when her great promotion to rank, and wealth, and matronhood came, she would reward them well by unceasing thoughtful, affectionate attention for all they were doing for her.

Coming to the widow Lady Rollamore was like coming to the mother of the man she was to marry, it

almost seemed to the girl. The woman whose son had been superseded by Lord Rollamore gave the latter only less love and consideration than she showed to her own son. For "he is absolutely blameless," she would say, "and I will not be one of those who visit the sins of the fathers on the children."

But, though Valerie's introduction to this part of the family was all peaceful and pleasant sailing, there was stormy weather and a rough sea still between the girl and the haven of matrimony. Mrs. Roche was the storm-breeder. She had conceived an antipathy to Valerie Heath before she saw her. She hated the girl who had no rank, no position, no status whatever, for presuming to aspire to marry her son. After she had seen her, and seen that she took her coming honors very easily, as well as very gladly, the temper-fiend rose in Mrs. Roche, and she vowed to herself that this thing should never come to pass.

There had been but one brief interview between these two—the woman who, with all her faults, was the nearest by nature, and should have been the dearest to Lord Rollamore, and the girl who was to be his wife. He had brought Valerie over to Parkventon the morning after her arrival at the Riverside cottage, and Mrs. Roche had received her in a dressing-gown and a darkened chamber that reeked with the fumes of various drugs which the latter had taken for the quieting of her nerves.

Valerie had gone in frankly and in all friendliness, for nothing had been said to her by her lover of his mother's antagonism to their union. He had told her that much trouble and a mingled feeling of remorse and resentfulness at fate had soured and poisoned his mother's better nature to a certain extent, and he had pleaded that Valerie would be tolerant and patient with her.

“She has sinned, but she has sorrowed and suffered for it. You’ll remember that she *is* my mother, won’t you, Valerie?”

With tears in her happy, fearless eyes, the girl gave the required promise, and added,—

“I’ll love her like my own mother, if she’ll let me.”

But the enthusiasm with which she proffered her affection received a check at once when she went into the dim room where Mrs. Roche, looking very haggard and worn, without her war-paint, awaited her.

“I have brought my future wife to you, mother. I hope you will let her be as a daughter to you.”

Mrs. Roche looked the girl over steadily, from head to foot, before she replied, and Valerie’s color and spirit rose under the slighting scrutiny.

“So this is the young person I heard of from your wife, Rollamore; the young lady who was flirting with you in your studio on the eve of your marriage to another woman?”

“I didn’t know he was going to be married; don’t blame me for loving him! When he wanted me to do so, *how* could I help it?” Then, feeling that her words conveyed a reproach to him for that perfidy, which she had long since forgiven, she added,—“Do let bygones be bygones, Mrs. Roche. Let me be, as he says, a daughter to you! You will find me a true one if you’ll have me.”

For a moment it seemed as if Valerie’s honest appeal had moved the elder woman. Then she remembered that the girl would have her own social battle to fight when she was married, and that she had no family, no “people” to back her up. Such a daughter-in-law would be very useless to her, she reminded herself, hardening her heart as she did it. The thought worked her up into one of her sudden, uncontrollable furies,

and she exclaimed, with a fierce energy that staggered Valerie,—

“You are premature with your offers of filial devotion to me, Miss Valerie Heath. I tell you, you will never be Lady Rollamore.”

“Don’t say that! don’t hate me so,” Valerie said, with a little sob. “Rollamore, ask your mother to take back her cruel words; they cut me like a knife.”

“No power on earth shall part me from you, darling!” he said boldly. “Mother, I am sorry you should have forgotten the deep debt you owe me for the injury you did me when I was an infant—an injury I have forgiven, but which I can’t forget—when you insult, threaten, and distress the girl whom I love as my life, and who is to be my wife. She came to you unprejudiced, full of warm, generous intentions of behaving as a daughter should to the mother of her husband. You have received her in a hostile spirit, which is as madly unreasonable as it is cruel.”

“You are siding with her—with *her*—against your mother?” Mrs. Roche cried, springing to her feet and advancing towards him with outstretched hands. “Oh, my son!—my son!—the only one left to me to love, are you going to cast me off utterly for *her*?”

“I will never forget that I am your son—”

“Then leave her! Cast her off, at my request—at my command—or it will be the worse for you! You it is who have insulted me by placing her under the protection of the woman who usurped my name, and place, and honors. To bring her to me at all would have been an insult, but to bring her to me from that woman’s house is a deeper one still.”

“Come, Valerie, we have had enough of this,” he said, taking her hand to lead her from the room, whereupon Mrs. Roche flung herself back in a fit of hysterics,

to escape from the sound of which Lord Rollamore hurried Valerie out of the house, and back to the gracious atmosphere of his stepmother's little house, where every one was kind to her.

In this little house a pleasing excitement filled every minute of the day, for Fergus and May had just been married very quietly, and Gilbert and Florence were to follow their example as soon as a suitable house could be got and furnished for them. This last-named bride-elect had nothing to endure at the hands of her future husband's family but loving kindness. They had, one and all, gone out of their way to show Mrs. Maunders that they honored her the more for the independent spirit which had made her keep a shop rather than exist in "genteel poverty," or rely on the charity of relations.

"If they had slighted mother, or looked down on the dear old shop, which has been the means of educating us and giving us all our hearts could desire, I should never have been happy, even with you, Gilbert," she told him, when the other pair came back with the story of the treatment Valerie had received from Mrs. Roche.

"You must remember my mother is an angel, and poor Rollamore's mother is very much the reverse. Her hatred and malice ought not to affect them. Valerie has done her duty and offered daughterly dutifulness. As her offer has been repulsed, she will be justified in steering clear of Mrs. Roche, who would never be a good companion for her."

"Valere's a dear girl. She has been telling me how heart-broken she was when he threw her over for money. She doesn't care a penny for the position he can give her now. She only wants him."

"It's easy enough for a girl to say that, but not many would come out of such a test as you had, in the

splendid way you did, Flo," Gilbert answered, with a lover's pardonable belief in the superiority of his own choice. "Valerie's a very nice girl, but I can't help thinking she never loses sight for an instant of the fact that she will be Lady Rollamore."

"She tells me she would just as soon he was only the painter with a small income whom she fell in love with first."

"At any rate, Rollamore is satisfied that it's for himself, and himself alone, that she's going to marry him. He's a happy fellow to be able to give the girl he loves all he can give her."

"As for that, Gilbert, you give me my whole heart's desire, so you ought to be just as happy as he is."

"We shall be comparatively poor, my dearest girl."

"Shall we? Poverty must be faced, then, and overcome by work. I don't mean to be an idle woman because I am to be a married one."

"There will be no need for that. I shall be able to maintain my wife, thank God," he said jealously.

"That ability I've never doubted, dear Gilbert, but it won't interfere with my work. Why should I be idle because my husband can support me? There has been no degradation in my giving music and painting lessons all these years while I've been Florence Maunders, so there will be none when I am Florence Kilburn. I've worked hard and improved a good deal lately, and I've the offer of a great number of pupils, more than I ever had before. I shall be prouder than ever of being a self-helpful woman, now that I shall help you too."

"I'll try to forget that I once believed I had a glorious future to offer you, darling."

"You did offer it, and I accepted it with you. I can't regret having lost it, for *you* are left."

"You'll be as glorious a wife to me as if, instead of

being the humble man I am now, I was still Lord Rollamore, I'm sure of that," he said, with happy enthusiasm. "I'll never regret not having more to lay at your feet again as long as I live."

"Then we shall be entirely one at heart," she told him confidently.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE AGONY OF HELPLESSNESS.

"THERE must be an understanding between us before I leave your house," Mrs. Roche said tremulously, when her son told her that, as Mr. Roche was well enough to be removed from Parkventon, he, Lord Rollamore, had fixed his wedding-day.

"We will have the understanding or explanation, or whatever you like to call it now, if you please, mother. You don't like my future wife because she's not what you call a swell. But neither she nor I will bear any malice on that account. Only leave us in peace, and whenever you want me I'll come to you."

Her lips worked painfully as he spoke, and the angry blood surged up into her face.

"If you knew what you owed me you would not so callously cast me off for the sake of a girl who springs from the mud."

"I will not listen to you, mother, if you speak in this way of Valerie, who is as good as gold. I, better than any one, know how good and true she is."

"Pooh!" she said insultingly, "I know the type; she was coy and retreated when you were a poor, struggling artist—"

"She didn't do anything of the kind, God bless her,"

he interrupted hotly ; “she would have married me even if I had to borrow the money from her to pay for the wedding-ring. She was a *good* girl, she has always been good. I can never do her homage enough ; she taught me to be a man, she shamed me out of my selfish satisfaction, with the mean dishonorable inertia of my life—”

“You put her on too high a pedestal. Be guided by me for once. Who can love you as well as your mother? Who can be so jealous for your honor? Listen, if you will break with this girl, who will do you harm, and no good, I will take *him* away,” she nodded her head in the direction of Mr. Roche’s apartment, “where he will never trouble you again. He has nearly lost his memory. The worst he could say about you would be put down to the ravings of lunacy—”

“You think so, Mrs. Roche?” a querulous voice broke in from the doorway. “Not much of a lunatic, am I, Lord Rollamore? I am only a battered, badly-treated man, whose wife wants to get him put away in a mad-house. But I’m not mad, and my memory is good enough to spoil your bad game.”

He came forward leaning on a crutch, gesticulating and shaking his head with angry energy.

“You thought I was too much of a cripple to crawl out and listen at the door? But I did it, for I knew my life and liberty were in danger.”

“Go back to bed,” his wife said calmly ; “you shame me, you astound my son, by your ravings, that have no meaning. Come back to your room, I will help you.”

He suffered himself to be half led, half carried, by her to the door, but there he halted, and turned with an ugly smile towards Lord Rollamore.

“Come to me if you want to know more about yourself than your mother has told you yet,” he was saying with suave spite, when she withdrew her supporting arm suddenly, and he fell helplessly forward, bruising himself against the edge of the door.

Half stunned and fainting, he managed, before he became insensible, to gasp out,—

“You’re no more ‘Lord Rollamore’ than I am. You’re a groom’s—”

He could articulate no more, and a shriek from Mrs. Roche would have drowned his words, even if he had been able to speak. Wildly she began to summon aid, to give directions, to deplore “this sudden access of mania,” to do anything, in fact, that might stave off the questioning from her son, which she felt was imminent.

But he was not to be put off by sensationalism now. He had heard enough to justify him in showing what, at another time, might have been stigmatized as curiosity.

“You must finish that sentence of Mr. Roche’s for me, mother,” he said, taking her hands very quietly.

“I did not hear what he was saying. I will not be taken to task for his ravings. He is mad, he is not accountable, he shall be sent to an asylum. Ah! don’t look at me in that way, my son. It is for you, it is for your sake that I will take what may seem harsh measures towards him.”

She wailed and wept away from him into the plump recesses of a large chair, turning her head towards its cushioned back, concealing the expression of her features as best she could.

“I don’t care what you do with Mr. Roche, mother. Probably he will be less harmful in an asylum than out of it. But you must tell me what he threatened

when he said I was 'no more Lord Rollamore than he was.' He was savage, but sane, when he said that."

"You are hurrying onwards to your own destruction; you are a fool to press me into a corner in this way. Oh, my son, my son, have pity on your miserable mother! Leave me now, cease to harass me with questions that I can't—that I *dare not* answer. I pledge myself that Mr. Roche shall never annoy you again. I pledge myself to accept Valerie Heath as my daughter. Anything—anything you ask of me I will do."

"Tell me the truth, mother?" he interrupted.

Again she began to entreat and implore that he "would not torture her by asking these terrible questions."

"Was it not enough," she asked, "that her own life had been embittered by this secret which she had to keep for his good?"

Then, finding he was sternly resolved on hearing it, she prayed for time.

"To-morrow my nerves will be steadier," she said; "to-morrow, if you still insist, I will tell you all—everything! Grant me till to-morrow."

With a sigh of suppressed impatience and bitter disappointment, at last he gave up the attempt to extract the truth for that day, at least. That what he had to hear was something which would be crushing in its power to degrade him—he felt miserably convinced. Once or twice the temptation assailed him to do as his mother had implored him, "let sleeping dogs lie," and remain in safe ignorance of this secret, which, once known, would probably blight his happiness! In order to avert the possibility of being overcome by this temptation, he ordered his horse and rode over to consult Valerie Heath, half promising himself that he

would abide by her decision. She gave it, at once, without a moment's hesitation.

"Hear the truth, and, however bad it may be, act boldly and honestly, Francis."

"Will you stick to me through thick and thin?" he asked.

"It can't be anything that can separate us, for you've done nothing wrong, and, even if you had, I should stick to you just the same."

"Then I won't fear, whatever it may be," he said heartily; "and now, as my own house isn't the happiest place in the world just now, I shall ask Lady Rollamore to give me some dinner, and let me stay the evening with you all."

So he stayed and dined, and spent several hours that had a good deal of happiness in them, in spite of those notes of alarm which had been struck by his mother's husband.

It was late when he reached home. Two or three of the servants who had no particular business in that part of the house were scattered about the hall as he entered, and he felt that there was a good deal of excitement in the atmosphere.

"Is Mr. Roche worse? Has anything happened?" he asked; and they told him "that Mrs. Roche had taken her husband away, had him carried, still in an unconscious state, to the carriage, which had taken them to a railway-station some miles beyond Caddleton. The carriage had not come back yet, and no one knew exactly which station they had gone to. All that was certain was that it was not Caddleton."

His mother had gone away taking her secret with her, and, till the coachman came back, it was idle for him to attempt to go in pursuit. It was well on into the middle of the night before the carriage returned. When it did,

it was too late to go off on a vague search. Mrs. Roche had been driven to the railway station of a large town, and had hired a couple of men to lift her husband across the platform into a railway carriage. But what train she had taken the coachman couldn't say, as he had been unable to leave his horses.

Inquiries at the railway station the following day elicited the fact that she had taken tickets to Paddington. At Paddington all traces of them ceased, and, after a few days, Lord Rollamore submitted to the inevitable, gave up the attempt to find them, and finally returned home with the conviction that the rest of his life would be passed under a cloud, which only Valerie could brighten.

After having an exhaustive conversation with Gilbert on the subject, both men came to the conclusion that, as no other course was open to him, Lord Rollamore should remain at Parkventon, and continue to be outwardly all that he had been before. But, inwardly, "I feel myself to be an impostor, for Roche was not mad when he said I was no more Lord Rollamore than he was."

The two marriages came off very soon after this, and for a time it seemed as if the county meant to hold aloof from the Rollamores on account of her antecedents. But this mistaken idea was exploded when the greatest of all the female magnates declared that "Lady Rollamore was not the stumbling-block to local society entering Parkventon." The wife would have been suffered to take her place with her husband, if grave doubts as to whether that husband had any place at all were not permeating the public mind. These things were scarcely said, but they were expressed in various ways, and then Lord Rollamore knew that the cloud,

unless it was lifted in his lifetime, would hang over his children, and his children's children.

Knowing this, and feeling his own helplessness, he sank into a state of deep despondency. Not even his wife could rouse him out of the moods of miserable, dark uncertainty which Roche's words and his mother's obstinacy had brought upon him.

"If I could die before I have a son born to me, Gilbert would succeed me, and the wrong would be righted," he would tell her often—till her fainting soul admitted the cruel truth, that he longed for death to an extent which would surely soon break down either his body or his mind.

CHAPTER XXXII.

"LOOK INTO YOUR OWN HEART."

"ROLLAMORE is getting so awfully parsimonious that it will be impossible for me to continue to act as his agent much longer," Gilbert Kilburn said to his wife one day, after having spent several weary hours in going over accounts with his half-brother.

"He doesn't want to cut down your salary, does he?" Florence asked anxiously. She was not a mercenary woman, but the idea of curtailing any of the refinements of their pretty home had its terrors for her.

"No, my salary is about the only thing he doesn't mean to cut down. Poor fellow! this miserable doubt of his own identity has poisoned his mind, and will end by softening his brain, I'm afraid, unless it can be set at rest. Valerie tells me he is breaking his heart over the thought of spending money which may not

belong to him. His latest fad is to shut up Parkventon, or get my mother to live in it, and go back to London, set up his studio again, and live upon what he makes by his painting. She declares it is the best thing he can do. The necessity for work, when he had once openly pledged himself to do it, would prevent his brooding over the miserable mystery which surrounds him.”

“Then who would take the management of his income?”

“He’ll keep that in his own hands. He’s nervously averse to spending a farthing of what he fancies doesn’t belong to him. If he has any children, it’s to be hoped he won’t imbue them with the notion that they are frauds, and not real Kilburns.”

“Can’t you make him understand that Mr. Roche was off his head when he said it?”

“Unfortunately his mother confessed that there is a secret—one that would damage him a good deal. He’s always advertising, and entreating her to come forward and clear things up. But she’ll never do it.”

“Gilbert, if he is right in fearing what he does, *you* are the real Lord Rollamore.”

“*If* he is right, yes ; but I never allow myself to dream about what may never be proved.”

“I wonder if mamma could find out anything about Mrs. Roche now ? Would it be any use for her to advertise ? They are cousins, and she might respond in her desolation to an overture from another woman. Shall mamma try an advertisement in the *Times*, Gilbert ? It could do no harm ; it may do good.”

“It will have the appearance, I’m afraid, of *my* being anxious to find out in my own interests,” Gilbert said hesitatingly. “Poor fellow, I don’t want to throw him down, whoever he may be.”

“That’s wrong ; that’s weak,” his wife said decidedly. “If he is not your elder brother, he’s a usurper—an innocent and unintentional, and very unwilling one, but still a usurper.”

“That’s what he’s always calling himself. No one knows how the poor fellow suffers under the honors that have been thrust upon him.”

“Then don’t let us leave a stone unturned to release him from the burden of those honors, and help him into a state where he will have peace of mind. Valerie isn’t a bit happy there. She dreads having a son, poor woman, for fear he should hate it—not that, exactly, but be sorry that it was born. People in the neighborhood slight them, in consequence of something that has leaked out through the servants relative to that dreadful Roche business.”

“It’s ten to one, even if your mother did advertise, that it would ever meet Mrs. Roche’s eye.”

“But there is just the chance that she might see it, and, if she did, and mother could get hold of her to talk to, there’s no knowing what the influence of another woman might do.”

“You shall do as you like, Flo dear, only say nothing about it to either Rollamore or Valerie. It would only increase his nervousness and suspense. There’s quite a hungry look in the poor fellow’s eyes when he seizes the paper day after day, and sees no reply to those pathetic appeals of his.”

So Mrs. Gilbert Kilburn went off with her husband’s unwilling consent to enlist her mother in the cause of finding out the truth, if possible, from Mrs. Roche.

At the first mention of the service required of her, Mrs. Maunders was frightened. To be brought into contact at all with her cousin was dreadful to her, and it was doubly dreadful that she should go to her on

such a mission, and through the medium of an advertisement. She explained to her daughter that badness of Mrs. Roche's temper was an unknown quantity, and that even if she (Mrs. Maunders) succeeded in finding her and forcing an interview upon her, terror would interfere with the usefulness of the achievement.

"You will be given the needful courage and strength when the time comes—if it ever does come," Florence said encouragingly, and then, after a few more protests, Mrs. Maunders allowed the advertisement to be written and sent to the agony columns of the *Times* and *Daily Telegraph*.

For six weeks these advertisements were inserted every day, and just as the forlorn hope of their extracting a sign of recognition from her was expiring, Mrs. Roche wrote to her cousin and quondam friend.

"I have done daily battle with my inclination for a month," she wrote, "now it has grown too strong for me. I must see some one who loved me once again before I die. My son has never loved me ; perhaps this is all my fault, not his, but it is a heavy punishment. I tried to be strong, and shut myself off from all human kind who knew me, and knew of my shortcomings. I am less hard, less brave, less strong than I believed myself to be. If you will come *alone* on Thursday to the Paddington Station by the train that gets in at six in the evening, some one will meet you who will bring you to me. I send you a check to cover your expenses. You must be alone. If you try to trap me into seeing any one else, you will fail to find me. Carry a book in your hand, and stand under the clock on the arrival platform at a quarter past six.—Your miserable Cousin."

"I would as soon face a herd of wild cattle as meet her alone," Mrs. Maunders said nervously ; "but I'd

much *sooner* face them than disobey her, and take any one with me."

"Oh! it will be a mere nothing when you once get over the first awkward five minutes, mamma," Mrs. Sheffield said soothingly. "Think how much you have to hear, and how important what you have to hear may be to Gilbert and Florence. Poor Lord Rollamore, too! how much better for him if he could only know the truth, whatever it is. He told me to-day that he would rather break stones on the road than live another twelve months as he has lived the last. He says nobody will believe that he couldn't find out if he tried. He reads in every face he meets that he is in league with his mother."

"I don't believe there is anything to find out. What should there be?" Mrs. Maunders said fretfully. "Lord Rollamore has no right to take a few idle words to heart, and upset every one about him."

"He upsets himself far more than he does any one else, mother. Now you have a slight chance of clearing away the mists, you'll try to do it, won't you?" Florence asked coaxingly. "There will soon be others to think of besides ourselves. If Valerie and I are blessed with children, we would wish there to be no mysteries about them. They must not be brought up in false positions, as both Rollamore and Gilbert were. Both Valerie and I want it to be all clear light about our children."

"I shall tremble like an aspen when I do see her, and I shall never be able to worry her with many questions," Mrs. Maunders said, and when she said that, they knew that she had strung herself up to the dreaded task, and that she would go on what was to her a very terrible mission.

In view of the extremely probable failure of this mis-

sion, they had all decided not to let Lord Rollamore know that Mrs. Roche had written to her cousin in reply to the latter's advertisements. When the day came, Mrs. Maunders went down to the station in a close fly and a paroxysm of fear and dread of seeing Lord Rollamore, and of having the object of her journey suspected by him. But eventually she was got off without hindrance, and then, for six hours, she suffered such preliminary pangs of embarrassment and deadly fear as rendered her nearly incapable of stepping out on to the platform when she reached her journey's end.

Placing herself, book in hand, under the clock at a quarter-past six, she waited, with her heart in her mouth, for a few minutes. Then she was accosted by a plainly-dressed, middle-aged woman.

"Is your name Maunders? If it is, you are to please to follow me."

Mrs. Maunders faltered along the platform, and into a cab at the end of it. When the address had been given, and they had fairly started on their way, the woman spoke again.

"You'll find Mrs. Roche a good deal altered. You haven't seen her for a long time? Prepare yourself for a great change."

"Is she—has she been ill?" Mrs. Maunders asked timidly.

"Ill of a broken heart, and there's not many worse illnesses than that, unless it be a guilty mind. You'll find her changed in many ways."

"Is Mr. Roche with her! Is he better?"

"He died five or six months ago; died mad. I was his nurse in the asylum, and when he went I came to his widow. Yes, you'll find her a good deal changed."

They had driven a long way from the station, it seemed to Mrs. Maunders, and still the cab went on

and on. In her ignorance of London she had not the faintest notion of the locality in which they came to a halt finally. A short road leading away from a long, dull, deserted one on to acres of building ground, covered with bricks and mortar. The house at which they stopped looked poor and plain. There were no flowers on its window balconies, no curtains at its windows. Before she had time to say more than, "Does Mrs. Roche live *here*?" surely not," she was shown through a dark passage into a room poorly furnished, dimly lighted, where, before a handful of fire, what was left of Mrs. Roche cowered.

Plainly dressed in a black gown of woollen material, with the few gray hairs she had left tucked away beneath a plain cap, with no ornaments or jewelry of any description, with her pallid, wrinkled face undefiled by paint, she looked as unlike the splendidly-dressed Mrs. Roche of other days as it was possible to conceive any one looking.

She rose up, trembling visibly, as Mrs. Maunders came in, and went a step to meet her.

"Florence," she said, "you've been a good woman all your life. Aren't you afraid to come near me? I've been a bad wife, a bad mother,—a false woman to every one who trusted me! But I don't look as if I were enjoying the fruits of my wickedness, do I? Ah, what happiness is your portion in comparison with mine! You have daughters who love you, and who are well settled in life; you have peace, an honest occupation, and an easy conscience, while *I* have—"

"Tell me your troubles, dear cousin; I may help you to bear them," Mrs. Maunders interrupted gently.

"My troubles!" she laughed harshly. "My troubles date from the day I told my first lie to my husband. If he had not believed me, my son would be a—"

“Tell *me* the truth, at least,” Mrs. Maunders interrupted, with a little sob.

Then Mrs. Roche drew her down into a chair close to her own side, and, after a minute’s pause, during which she had been convulsed with emotion, she said,—

“I am not so bad as you all think. That money which I got my son’s wife to leave to me, in order that with it I might buy his obedience, I have given it all back to her daughter—to Mrs. Fergus Kilburn. I have given it all back ; I have kept none of it. I am living poorly and plainly, as you see. Is not *this* sufficient expiation for the errors of my youth ?”

For once Mrs. Maunders had the courage of her principles.

“No, dear, it is not enough,” she said, very sadly and firmly. “You have much more to do before you can say that you have done all that is in your power to expiate the—sins of your youth. You will tell me—”

“I will tell you nothing more,” Mrs. Roche said, turning away dejectedly. “I am not very strong—I can’t live long ! My life is broken—broken, Florence ! It has been a broken life for more years than I can remember. Then, two years ago, I *thought* I saw a gleam of sunshine. I wanted to see my son honored and in a high place, and I plotted and planned to make it better for him, that he should seem to honor and respect me. I wanted to share the glorious position I had won for him. But I have been baffled—I have been deservedly baffled ! And in trying to atone for my fault, I have left myself destitute.”

By this time Mrs. Maunders was crying. The task that she had been sent to perform was a harder one than her nature could endure without a terrible strain.

“What did you want of me ? Why did you compel me to see you, Florence ? Look into your own heart,

Was it pity for *me* that prompted you?—or was it the hope that you might induce me to say something which would throw my son down, and set Gilbert Kilburn—your daughter's husband—up?”

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CLEAR LIGHT AT LAST.

THERE was great anxiety among those who were in the secret of the cause of her absence when three or four days had passed and brought no letter or communication of any kind from Mrs. Maunders. Her daughters, who had so strenuously urged her to go on the mission that was so repugnant to her, each suffered more private pangs than they cared to admit either to one another or their respective husbands. As usual, the questions of outsiders as to why the mistress of the most popular place of resort in Caddleton was absent so long from her post were embarrassing to a degree, while the speculations which Lord Rollamore indulged in added poignancy to the pain they already felt in deceiving him ever so little, even for his own good.

“It's an extraordinary thing that she should have gone away without leaving her address with either of her daughters. Such an attached mother as she is, too. There must be something behind it all.”

These and sundry other remarks of a similar nature were made freely to Doctor Sheffield as he went his daily rounds. But Doctor Sheffield had a great gift of imperturbability, and the remarks were answered only by such impassive glances that people gave him up as either ignorant of the whole matter, or guiltily cognizant of everything.

For a brief time, this minor matter of Mrs. Maunders's unaccounted-for absence was overshadowed by a much more startling topic of conversation. Mrs. Fergus Kilburn, settled happily at Malta for a time while her husband was on the Mediterranean station, wrote home the surprising news that the whole of the large fortune left by her mother to Mrs. Roche had been restored to her.

"There must be a lot of good in her after all," the happy young wife wrote. "Fergus and I feel as if we had found a four-leaved shamrock; and we're coming home as soon as possible 'to scatter joy around the family.' Poor Lord Rollamore! I wish he would cease to think himself an impostor. Surely, now he hears that his mother has made this splendid restitution to me, he will think less hardly of her, and attribute those horrible doubts which Mr. Roche raised in his mind to the ravings of lunacy."

"That's all very kind and generous of May, but it's mighty poor reasoning," Gilbert said, when he read this. "Rollamore will be as glad as the rest of us that the money has gone back to where it belongs of right. But he'll attribute the act of restitution to the workings of remorse—as I do."

"Rollamore and his wife are both much brighter than I've ever seen them before, now that they are going," Florence replied. "Poor old Parkventon looks very sad, though, now that all the rooms are shrouded in brown holland, and nearly all the servants gone. They mean to go into the lodgings they've taken as Mr. and Mrs. White, and he won't spend a penny more than he makes by his painting till he knows more than he does now. Gilbert, I feel it in my heart that mother isn't staying away for nothing. Only, I wish she'd write."

“If the imperious Mrs. Roche orders her not to write, your mother is not the sort of woman to fight against the decree. ’Pon my word, though I am very fond of Rollamore, I shall be glad when he has gone. The sight of that lugubrious face of his depresses me out of the power of attending to my own work properly. They’re off to-morrow, you know.”

“Yes; and as soon as they’re settled, we’ll run up and see them, Gilbert. We mustn’t let poor Rollamore think that we’re ready to let him lapse from us. I know he’s always on the watch now to see if any of the family are affectionate or attentive to him with an effort. If he were to detect one, he would take it as a sure sign that there was no natural family feeling at work. Valerie says, if she has children, and they’re not like the Kilburns—‘frank,’ as she’s taken to calling them—she will be more convinced than ever that he is not the genuine article himself.”

“I’m rather sick of the subject,” Gilbert said forcibly; “it’s a kind of social suicidal mania that he’s suffering from. Let us cease worrying about the intangible affair, at least till your mother comes home.”

A day or two after this, the anxiously-expected letter from Mrs. Maunders came. She had nothing definite to tell them, she said, excepting that Mrs. Roche was very ill, and had requested that Mr. Wyndham, the late Lord Rollamore’s lawyer, be sent for. Would Gilbert therefore kindly send her that gentleman’s address?

The husband and wife looked at one another in silence for a few moments when they read this. Then Florence said,—

“There *is* something, after all. Mother has softened Mrs. Roche’s heart, and she will tell the truth to Mr. Wyndham.”

“Send her Mr. Wyndham’s address,” Gilbert replied curtly.

The possibilities that seemed to be opening before him were things about which he could not trust himself to speak, even to his wife.

“Dear mother has taken to works of darkness and secrecy too, you see,” Florence said, with a forced laugh; “she gives her address at a post-office in West Kensington, instead of from Mrs. Roche’s lodgings.”

“She needn’t have feared that I should have invaded Mrs. Roche.”

“No, Gilbert, but I should have told Valerie where she was, and she would have told her husband, and he *might* have gone impetuously and upset things. If she sends for Mr. Wyndham, it can be only that she may tell him all she has to tell. Poor thing, I’ve no doubt it will be easier for her to tell a painful story to a stranger than to her own son.”

“Now let us dismiss the subject from our minds,” Gilbert said, rising with the air of one who is throwing off a weight. “My mother wants us all to meet at her house and dine to-night, and so take a cheery, temporary leave of Rollamore. Don’t look dismal, Flo, as if you felt that he was going to stick in this painting groove forever. We’ll have him back at Parkventon before twelve months are over our heads.”

Mrs. Gilbert Kilburn nodded her head slowly, but it was scarcely a nod of assent. However, she dismissed the dismal expression, and refrained from making any allusion to the subject that was uppermost in the minds of the majority of the family party when they assembled at old Lady Rollamore’s that night.

The next day Mr. and Mrs. Francis White travelled up to town to commence the new life—the only life which was now endurable to him. Their lodgings

were rather in striking contrast to Parkventon, but Valerie declared she had always liked cosy rooms best. There was a good-sized room in the house empty, and with a good north light. This was, of course, surrendered to Mr. White for his studio, and once again Valerie fell into position of an artist's model ; but she was a model for her husband only now.

He was thought very eccentric, merely, both by many of his old private patrons and by picture dealers when he reappeared before them as White the artist. They looked upon it as a caprice on the part of the wealthy Lord Rollamore, that he should play at doing real work again. However, they humored the caprice, and encouraged him more than they had ever encouraged him before, so that, before long, he had a steady and remunerative sale for the steady work he did.

Happy in the hard work he was doing, happy in the lighter-heartedness of Valerie, who had suffered as only a sensitive woman can from the social snubs she had received when occupying the exalted position to which she never felt sure of her right, and conscious that he was living honorably now, whatever his mother's antecedents might have been, he began to feel more tolerantly towards that mother. It struck him, now that he had borne the burden of the discovery that she *was* his mother in a more manly way, that she would have shown him a more womanly side to her character than he had ever seen. These feelings strengthened when he found himself the father of a small son, whose likeness to his beautiful mother quite won a pardon for not being like any member of the Kilburn family they had ever seen. He was like a little Murillo when he was a month old, and about that time Mr. Wyndham came to see them.

The two men had parted on bad terms on that day

when Francis White, intoxicated by the news of his suddenly-acquired honors, and maddened by the knowledge that he had been trapped into a degrading marriage, had revealed all that was lowest in his nature to the lawyer. That nature had gone through the purifying fire of affliction, suspense, distrust of and keen analysis of its own motives since then, while at present it was softened as well as strengthened by a sense of undeserved happiness. This was a better as well as a stronger man who met him now, Mr. Wyndham felt, than the prosperous Lord Rollamore, with whom he had parted more than two years ago, had been.

“Mr. White, you will probably guess that my business with you concerns your mother. She has made an affidavit before me, with the contents of which it is necessary you should become acquainted with as little delay as possible,” the lawyer began abruptly, and White’s whole face lighted up with radiant relief as he replied,—

“Thank heaven! the false pretence has been made an end of. I feel that it is so by your addressing me as Mr. White, and I regard you as a messenger who brings light into my life.”

“Before you read your mother’s confession, it will be well that you should see her. A meeting between you would be less painful to you before you are in possession of *all* the hard facts of the case.

“I am ready to go to her at any moment, and to forgive her any wrong she may have done me. The injury can’t extend to my own boy, thank God, that’s why I wouldn’t have him born at Parkventon.”

Mr. Wyndham cast about in his own mind for a suitable reply to this. He had come intending to offer condolences to the man who had been cast down, but condolences would have seemed out of place here.

He had come, too, on behalf of Gilbert, who wanted the one he had accepted as a brother to take at least a moderate income from him now, even when he was about to be proved to be no brother at all.

“However, I think I’ll leave that part of the business to Gilbert himself,” Mr. Wyndham mentally resolved; “and Gilbert mustn’t offer it too soon—not till the first soreness has worn off.”

So he left that portion of his embassy unfulfilled, and hurried White off as soon as possible, to the little meanly furnished room, where his mother lay dying.

With him went his wife and baby son.

“I’m glad I wrote the truth, and had it witnessed before I saw him,” Mrs. Roche said, holding her arms out to her grandson; “perhaps, if I hadn’t, the old Adam would have been too strong in me. I might have held out and died silent, in order that *he* might be Lord Rollamore.”

“Instead of that, he is the grandson of—” White began questioningly.

Then a great wave of pity swept over his heart, and he held his child’s little face to his mother’s lips.

“He is your grandson, at least,” he said gently; “nothing can alter that, mother. I am glad that you should see and love my son before you die.”

“I have been a wicked woman,” she murmured imploringly. “I have been—”

The sound died away on her lips. She had gone to the Highest Court of Appeal, and those she left behind never presumed to judge her.

When the few legal ceremonies—they were very few, Mrs. Roche’s confession had been so ample and accurate—were gone through, and the reinstated Lord Rollamore and his wife Florence were fairly established at Park-venton, the Francis Whites were their first visitors.

They proved themselves to be a couple of born Bohemians, by being thoroughly well pleased with the lower estate to which they had fallen. At least they both declared that they had been given no fall, for that they had never felt at home in the higher state. As Mr. White boldly gave out the truth concerning himself, which was that he was the son born to his mother, when her husband, Mr. Kilburn, had been absent from her for fourteen months, that his mother had passed him off as six months, when he had really been only three months old, and that his real father was Clarke, the groom, on account of whom his mother had been eventually divorced. As he said this himself, people found no worse things to say of him. And after a time, as he succeeded more and more as a portrait painter, it was admitted in the Caddleton neighborhood, that perhaps Lord Rollamore's little daughter might do worse, by-and-by, than marry her favorite play-fellow and tyrant, young Francis White.

THE END.

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